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‘Letting’ and ‘Making’ Things Happen: an ethical puzzle

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Consider the following miniature dialogues on certain ethical topics which have been much debated in recent times among Christians and non-Christians alike:

- 1) A: It is all very well for you pacifists to refuse to take life; but by that refusal you are allowing the enemy—whose cause we agree is unjust—to kill people whom otherwise you could protect. You are thus responsible for the deaths of innocent people. Your refusal to take life, itself takes life.
B: No it does not. It is the enemy, not I, who takes life. I have failed to save life—which is not the same thing—and the only reason I have not done so is because it could only be achieved by killing.
- 2) A: This patient is suffering and has no chance of recovery. Would it not be best to put him out of his misery?
B: No, that would be murder. But I agree that it might be best to discontinue special treatment and let nature take its course.
- 3) B: Abortion is murder, for it involves taking a human life.
A: But in many cases it may be necessary to save a human life—that of the mother. Someone is going to die anyway; surely the mother’s life takes precedence.
- 4) B: Father Abraham, what am I doing in this flame? I never laid a finger on Lazarus!
A: Son, you had many opportunities to help him, and never took any of them. You are as responsible for his misery as if you yourself had infected him with his sores.
- 5) B: Unbar the doors! Throw open the doors! I will not have the house of prayer, the church of Christ, the sanctuary, turned into a fortress... The church shall be open, even to our enemies. Open the door!
A: Who killed the archbishop?... He could have kept himself from us long enough to allow our righteous anger to cool. That is just what he did not wish to happen; he insisted, while we were still inflamed with wrath, that the doors should be opened. Need I say more? I think, with these facts before you, you will unhesitatingly render a verdict of suicide while of unsound mind.¹

These dialogues vary considerably in subject, and in each case the debate could have been carried much further. But all have one thing in

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common. In each case B is claiming, explicitly or implicitly, that there is a serious difference—a very important one morally—between *making* something happen, bringing it about deliberately, and just *letting* it happen, even if the results are much the same either way. In cases 2, 4 and 5 the results are actually identical: the death of the patient (through natural causes or by euthanasia), the illness of Lazarus (by neglect or by deliberate infection), the death of Becket (whether by suicide or by murder). In 1 and 3 they are similar but not identical: the people killed because the pacifist refused to fight are not the same as those who would have died if he *had* fought; and the proposed abortion would kill the child, not the mother. In both these examples, A is making an additional claim: that the lives lost on B's principles are more valuable than those lost on his own.

There are certain other differences between the cases. In 2 the results of both action and inaction (A and B agree) are good on the whole; the question is about the means to an end. This does not hold for the others: in 1 and 3 the results are mixed, and in 4 and 5 they are definitely bad. In 2 there is not only identity of result but also of intention: both A and B intend that the patient shall die, there being no other way to relieve his pain. This is not so with the other four. The pacifist does not intend that innocent people shall be killed by the enemy; the anti-abortionist does not intend that the mother shall die; Dives does not intend that Lazarus shall suffer from sores; and even Becket does not intend his own death. In each case the result is foreseen but is not specifically desired.

Now there are many moral problems where this question of intention arises, but that of 'letting' and 'making' does not. For instance, we can imagine a dialogue in a situation like that of 2:

6) C: This man is suffering, and has no chance of recovery. Would it not be best to put him out of his misery?

D: No, that would be murder. But I have given him a dose of pain-killer to ease his suffering, and it will send him into a sleep from which he is unlikely to wake in his weakened condition.

Here D has 'made' something happen; he is not just 'letting' nature take its course. But he does not intend the death of the patient, as if he had given him a dose of cyanide; death is only foreseen, not intended. Many moralists, especially Roman Catholics, have argued that D's position is tenable, but not C's. This is known as the 'double effect' doctrine. D's giving the patient the pain-killer has two effects: one actually intended—the relief of his pain—and one not intended but foreseen—his death. The claim is that while it is wrong to make the end justify the means (as C would do), it is legitimate to seek a worthy end despite unwanted side-effects.

This is itself a much disputed topic in ethics, but not one that I

propose to discuss here. It is mentioned only to make it clear that it is *not* the point I am trying to discuss. In dialogues 1, 3, 4 and 5 it could be raised but is not; in 2 it could not be raised at all. The point that *is* raised in all five, and could not be raised in 6, is, as I have said, the claim that 'making something happen' and 'letting it happen' are not only distinct ideas (that much is obvious) but that the distinction between them is a morally significant one.

Criticisms of the distinction

This claim has been heavily criticized. Is there really any serious difference between 'letting' and 'making' when the results are indistinguishable? Perhaps there is when the results are not positively intended. At least this indicates a difference in the moral stance of the agent; but, as we have seen, in cases like 2 this difference is not present. If A and B both intend the patient to die, and the action of A and the inaction of B both lead to his actually dying, surely both are equally deserving of praise or blame, and we cannot, as many Christians have thought, approve reluctantly of B but reject A.

One very persuasive critic of the 'letting/making' distinction is Jonathan Glover.² He is actually criticizing what he calls the 'acts and omissions' doctrine: that failure to do something, from which failure bad results follow, is less bad than performing an act from which the same bad results also follow. This is very nearly the same distinction as the one I am discussing, but perhaps not quite. By ordering the doors to be unbarred, Becket was 'letting', not 'making', himself be murdered, but what he did was an act rather than an omission. Still, in general the two distinctions coincide. Glover admits, interestingly, that he cannot show the doctrine to be self-contradictory or irrational; but he thinks it draws its strength from being confused with other ethical stances.³ One is 'negative utilitarianism': the doctrine that it is more important to prevent suffering than to cause happiness. This view has something to be said for it, but Glover is right to say that it is quite different from the 'letting/making' distinction. In cases 1, 3 and 4, suffering results from both the action and the inaction, and negative utilitarianism supports A, if anything, rather than B. Still more so is this the case in 5, where Becket is insisting on doing a positive good (opening the cathedral to all) even at the cost of suffering.

A second confusion lies with the legal position. In law, omissions are seldom punished unless there was serious negligence on the part of the accused, or unless he had a positive legal duty in which he failed. If I omit to look where I am driving, and kill you, I am rightly punished. So, too, if I fail to provide for my children (to whom I have a legal duty): but not if I fail to provide food for you. The law does draw a distinction between 'acts' and 'omissions', although this says nothing on the ethical question: the law cannot make a crime of every kind of sin.

A third is with the fact that (as Glover puts it) 'harmful omissions are unavoidable, while most harmful acts can be avoided'. Even if I give all I have to feed the hungry in Uganda, I am omitting to feed the hungry in Somalia; but it is seldom that we have to choose between two positively harmful acts. This is true, but clearly does not affect any of our dialogue cases.

A fourth confusion stems from the fact that results of omissions are often only probable, whereas those of acts are practically certain. Thus the anti-abortionist in case 3 may argue it is not certain that the mother will die without an abortion, but certain that her child will die with one. However, this is not always so. If the pacifist in case 1 agrees to join the army, he may be assigned to the Catering Corps; and even if he fights, he may miss his targets. Conversely, the anti-euthanasiaist in 2 is sure his patient will die if treatment is withheld.

Yet a fifth arises from the maxim that in judging others we do right to be more 'lenient' than in planning what we do. I may make excuses for the rich man in 4, saying that he was only guilty of thoughtlessness, that he 'knew not what he did'; but clearly I cannot say this of my own present neglect of the poor, as *ex hypothesi* I am thinking of them and do know what I am doing.

If Glover is right in thinking that the doctrine he criticizes draws its strength from these or similar confusions, it has little to be said for it. I believe that some of its strength probably is drawn from at least the last of his 'other ethical stances', but I suspect that it has a strength of its own as well.

Defences of the distinction

Even if Glover is wrong, the most fundamental criticism of all has to be met: If the results of an act and an omission are identical, and so are the motives and intentions that lie behind them, what reason can we have for saying that one is permissible and the other not? What sort of answer can be made to this?

First, it might be replied that it is contrary to most people's intuitive feelings. If there is such a thing as objective right and wrong (and if there isn't, criticism of the distinction is as pointless as defending it) we must surely in the end appeal either to intuitive feelings, to consciences, or to divine revelation; and on this point I do not think there is any claim on either side that God has directly given us guidance. (He may have done so indirectly, however; we shall return to this point later.) Now both critic and defender of the distinction agree that to harm people is wrong, and presumably both would quote normal intuitive feelings of conscience in support of this. But normal intuitive feelings also suggest that there is a difference between 'letting' and 'making'. They do not, of course, suggest that 'letting' evil happen is always, or even often, permissible. Most of us would feel that Abraham in dialogue 4 was basically right, though a bit exaggerated in language. The

claim made is simply that 'letting' and 'making' are different, and that this *may* make the former permissible where the latter is not; not that it always will.

But intuitions must be treated with some caution. People's ethical feelings do not always coincide. Perhaps our intuitions are confused by the influence of Glover's 'other ethical stances'. More disturbingly, they may be biased because our own comfort is better served that way. Rejection of the distinction could be very embarrassing. Consider another dialogue, related to 4:

- 7) A: What are you doing on holiday, you murderer?
B: Murderer? What on earth are you talking about?
A: The money you are spending on your holiday could have gone to save lives. By using it on yourself you are really killing those you could have saved. Morally, though not legally, you are a murderer—and so is almost everyone in the country.

Clearly A's conclusion follows from a denial of the 'letting/making' distinction; and, equally clearly, life would be more comfortable for most of us if we didn't have to draw it. May it not be that our moral sense is warped by this consideration? Perhaps not. After all, in most of our original dialogues (4, and perhaps 1, are exceptions) B had no particular interest of this kind in making the distinction. Still, the argument from intuition must carry rather less weight if there is a chance that 'wishful thinking' may be involved.

A second defence could be based on a point made by Natalie Abrams.⁴ She points out that to deny the 'letting/making' distinction where *good* results follow, leads to absurd results. For instance (not Abrams' own): A and B are by the river when they see a child in the water, about to drown. B throws a lifebelt and pulls the child to shore; the child is grateful and thanks him. Then:

- 8) A: Why isn't he thanking me, too?
B: You didn't pull him out.
A: No, but I could have pushed him in again, and I didn't. My motive was the same as yours—I wanted him safe—and the results of my inaction were the same as those of your action. He was saved, so I deserve thanks as much as you.

Clearly this is preposterous; yet it surely follows from the denial of the 'letting/making' distinction. I should add that Abrams herself does not use this point to defend the distinction in the case of bad results. She thinks that in these the distinction does *not* hold, but is at a loss to see why there is this difference between 'good' inactions and 'bad' ones. Surely, though, it would be more logical to say that there is a difference in the 'bad' cases too?

There is in fact a kind of asymmetry between good and evil which

may help explain Abrams' puzzlement. Refraining from doing wrong is only the first step towards doing good; but refraining from doing good is itself a sin. Goodness makes higher demands than evil; Christ tells us to be perfect, even as our Father in heaven is perfect. Hence 'letting' and 'making' something evil happen may—indeed frequently will—look alike, because both are sins; 'letting' and 'making' something good happen are not particularly alike, because we are called to higher forms of holiness than simply 'letting' good things happen that would happen anyway.

We might add a third argument in defence of the distinction. Criticism of it is basically utilitarian: the rightness or wrongness of an act is thought to be determined solely by its consequences; as far, that is, as deciding what to do is concerned. (Where judging the worth of the agent performing the act, no doubt motives and intentions can be brought in too.) There are, of course, many well-known criticisms of utilitarianism, and replies to these. But one of the commonest types is to point to pairs of actions which have both similar results and similar motives, and yet to the normal judgement are ethically very different. Suppose, for instance, I am trying to persuade you to vote for my party in an election. I may give a careful, reasoned explanation of the superiority of its policies over its rival's; or I may simply assure you that its candidate is a devout Christian and his opponent a militant atheist, knowing that this will decide you firmly in favour of the former, and also knowing that it is untrue. Both acts have the same purpose, the same motive, and the same result; yet one's instinctive reaction is to say that the first is quite fair and the second despicable. Might not the same be true where 'letting' and 'making' are concerned?

There are of course utilitarian replies to this sort of argument. Lying usually has evil consequences, and each lie contributes to undermine general confidence and trust, without which life would be unmanageable. This is certainly true, and utilitarians are by no means all liars! But are such side-effects necessarily always present? (For instance, can an *undetected* lie undermine general confidence? If not, our 'political' example might be justified, provided that you are going to die before finding out the deception!) And even if they are always present, are they of such weight as to make the difference which we naturally feel exists between honest and dishonest canvassing? Surely the natural view is that even if there is no difference at all in results, the acts themselves are poles apart.

Law and the intrinsic nature of acts

Paul Helm has pointed out,⁵ apropos of Glover's discussion of this topic, that 'although the distinction between acts and omissions is of no significance for utilitarianism, it is crucial in an ethic of Law'—such as he thinks the Christian one to be. To develop this point: The commandment 'Thou shalt not steal' does not of itself command us to

help someone recover his or her lost property. This too may be required of us (cf. Exod. 23:4; Deut. 22:1-3), but that is a different commandment; it may be of less weight in cases of conflict between the two, and it may be less wrong to break it. More relevant to our present concern, it may be that other considerations might justify us in ignoring it which would *not* justify us in breaking the other and committing actual theft.

This is certainly true. An ethic of law is not utilitarian. Many Christians, though, might feel unhappy at the idea that Christianity has a law ethic. However, the sort of reasoning Helm employs can be used in non-legalistic ethics too. It applies wherever an action is held to have value or disvalue *in itself*. The scholastic moral theologians used to teach that among the features of an action which needed to be right, before the action itself could be called good, was the '*objectum*', sometime misleadingly translated the 'object' of the action (misleadingly, because it does not mean the action's purpose but its objective or intrinsic nature, the action described in itself without reference to motives, circumstances or consequences). This can be considered on its own, and judged to be good, bad or indifferent, though our judgement of the whole situation may be different.

For example, prayer to God is in itself good: good, not because of any motives or consequences it may have, but because it is the proper approach of a created being to its Creator, a drawing near to God in the way we ought to draw near. This goodness may be spoilt by bad motives, such as a desire to be 'seen of men', or by evil consequences intended, as if I were to pray for the death and damnation of my enemies. But a prayer considered simply as a prayer is so far, and in virtue of being what it is, *prima facie* good. On the other hand, telling a lie is on this view wrong, not because of any motives or consequences it may have (though these may make it worse), but intrinsically, because it is a misuse of the powers of communication which God has given us. This badness may be offset by good motives or good consequences intended (whether and when it can be so offset had been disputed for centuries!), as in the classical instance of lying to a would-be murderer about where his victim is hiding. Yet considered simply as a lie, a lie is, in virtue of being what it is, *prima facie* wrong.

Thus our political canvasser (the deceitful one, that is), is performing the act called 'lying', which is in itself wrong. This is not necessarily to say that it can never be justified to tell a lie; but to do so must be judged wrong as far as the *objectum*, the intrinsic nature of the deed, is concerned.

It is when this factor—which, it will have been realized by now, need not be expressed in terms of law—is brought in, that the apparent puzzles in our opening dialogues begin to resolve themselves. In each case the 'making' and the 'letting' discussed has similar or identical effects, and in some even the same intention; but the individual actions

and omissions had an intrinsic moral value or disvalue of their own. And this makes it possible to value the total situation in each alternative differently. That does not of course excuse or justify B in every case. Thus in dialogue 1, A might still maintain that fighting in a just cause was the lesser of two evils, even when the intrinsically bad nature of fighting was taken into consideration. In 2 he might argue that euthanasia was a positively good act in itself—that ending pain was not a result but part of the intrinsic nature of what he did—or he might assimilate the situation to that of dialogue 8, and claim that he was ‘making’ something good happen, while B was only ‘letting’ it happen.⁶ And in 4 it is quite certain that the rich man was doing something gravely wrong in leaving Lazarus to suffer, even though it was not the same wrong as positively causing him to suffer. And so on. But even if we hold that the ‘letter’ is as guilty as the ‘maker’, we are doing this for (partly) different reasons. Only partly so, of course, in so far as consequences and perhaps intentions may be the same; but partly so, for all that. It is not in fact the ‘letting/making’ distinction that is important; it is the fact that different actions or inactions are involved. ‘Letting/making’ is only one possible distinction among many.

It is perhaps worth noting that in the New Testament we are several times given lists of qualities to be sought in the Christian character or developed in it by the Holy Spirit (e.g., Gal. 5:22; Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:12; 1 Tim. 6:11). I think it would be true to say that most of these qualities are such as are to be seen chiefly in acts of particular kinds; they are qualities like humility, gentleness, fortitude, or self-control. It is the *act* that embodies the state of mind and soul that lie behind it. Other qualities mentioned, such as compassion, kindness and justice, are concerned more with *results* of particular kinds, though these are, I think, a minority in the list. Both have their place in the Christian life. But the point here is that the former do have their place, and a prominent one; acts as well as results are important. That is why ‘making’ a thing happen—whether a good one or bad—can be more important morally than just ‘letting’ it happen. The act, and the condition of the soul that issues in the act, are important in themselves.

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NOTES

- 1 T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* (Faber & Faber, London 1938, 4th ed. abridged) pp.72 and 82–3.
- 2 J. Glover, *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (Penguin, Harmondsworth 1977) especially pp.92ff.
- 3 Glover’s list is in fact rather longer than the one given here, but I think I have reproduced his main points.
- 4 Natalie Abrams, ‘Active and Passive Euthanasia’, *Philosophy*, 53, 1978, pp.257ff.
- 5 Paul Helm, ‘Who is my Neighbour?’, *Third Way*, 2, 1978, pp.13–14. The illustration is mine.
- 6 So Abrams, loc. cit.