

See also

- 3. The Indian and the ice
- 16. Racing tortoises
- 42. Take the money and run
- 94. The Sorites tax

7. When no one wins

Private Sacks was about to do a terrible thing. He had been ordered to first rape and then murder the prisoner, whom he knew to be no more than an innocent civilian from the wrong ethnic background. There was no doubt in his mind that this would be a gross injustice – a war crime, in fact.

Yet quickly thinking it over he felt he had no choice but to go ahead. If he obeyed the order, he could make the ordeal as bearable as possible for the victim, making sure she suffered no more than was necessary. If he did not obey the order, he himself would be shot and the prisoner would still be violated and killed, but probably more violently. It was better for everyone if he went ahead.

His reasoning seemed clear enough, but of course it gave him no peace of mind. How could it be that he was both going to do the best he could in the circumstances and also a terrible wrong?



'If I don't do it somebody else will' is generally speaking a weak justification for wrongdoing. You are responsible for the wrong you do, regardless of whether or not others would have done it anyway. If you see an open-top sports car with the keys in the ignition, jump in and drive it away, your action does not stop being theft simply because it was only a matter of time before someone else did the same.

In Sacks's case, the justification is subtly different, and importantly so. For what he is saying is, 'If I don't do it somebody else

will, with much worse consequences.' Sacks is not just resigned to the bad to come; he is trying to make sure the best possible – or least worst – thing happens.

Usually, it would seem perfectly moral to do what you can to prevent as much harm as possible. The best Sacks can do is save his own life and make the death of the prisoner as painless as possible. Yet this reasoning leads him to take part in a rape and murder, and surely that can never be the morally right thing to do.

The temptation to imagine a third possibility – perhaps just shooting the prisoner and himself – is hard to resist. But resist it we must, for in a thought experiment we control the variables, and what we are asking in this one is what he should do if the only two possibilities are to carry out the order or to refuse to do so. The whole point of fixing the dilemma this way is to force us to confront the moral problem head on, not think our way around it.

Some might argue that there are occasions when it is impossible to do the right thing. Damned if you do and damned if you don't, immorality is unavoidable. In such circumstances, we should pursue the least bad option. That allows us to say that Sacks both does the best he can and does wrong. But this solution merely creates a different problem. If Sacks did the best he can, then how could we blame him or punish him for what he did? And if he deserves no blame or punishment, surely he did no wrong?

Perhaps then the answer is that an action can be wrong, but the person doing it blameless. What he *did* was wrong but he was not wrong to do it. The logic holds. But does it reflect the complexity of the world or is it a sophistical contortion to justify the unjustifiable?

The alternative is to say that the end does not justify the means. Sacks should refuse. He will die and the prisoner suffer

more, but it is the only moral choice available to him. That may preserve Sacks's integrity, but is that a nobler goal than the saving of lives and the relief of suffering?

See also

- 44. Till death us do part
- 55. Sustainable development
- 82. The freeloader
- 91. No one gets hurt