MORAL INERTIA

by Mary Maxwell

Abstract. The phenomenon of moral inertia is often explained by reference to all-encompassing features of human nature, such as laziness and cowardice, but in fact it has many causes. A modern person may fail to "stand up" to social evil because he has difficulty seeing it—perhaps because it is deliberately hidden or because she and her neighbors cannot find ways to recognize and discuss it as a soluble problem. Fourteen factors contributing to moral inertia will be listed here under the headings of *cognitive* and *linguistic* factors. Further, a consideration of ideology's role (both liberal and Marxist) in inhibiting action against social evil will be presented.

Keywords: apathy; evil; moral language; morality; social action.

For evil to triumph all that is needed is for good men to do nothing.
        —Edmund Burke
When visible, palpable, banal evil shows itself, few will speak out.
        —Hannah Arendt
This must stop!
       —Nicholas to Mr. Squeers
    in Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*

The subject of this article is moral inertia in the sense of moral inaction or moral malaise. We witness horrific things happening in the world yet often do little to stop them. Examples of things that would widely be regarded as "evils" are the practice of torture by governments, the irreversible pollution of habitats by industry, extreme economic injustice, and the buildup of grotesque weaponry. Undoubtedly, some people are moved to act against these evils, as the plethora of voluntary organizations shows. Yet the majority of us stand idly by. We do not throw our moral weight against these evils.

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As I argue elsewhere (Maxwell 1991, 5-16), there are a number of "design errors" in the human moral system: the option of deviance, tribalism, the arbitrariness of values, the diffusion of responsibility, and the moral immunity of "group persons" and officeholders. However, in this discussion I limit myself to three categories of items that help account for the phenomenon of moral inertia: *certain cognitive traits, problems of moral language,* and *ideological factors.* In the category of cognitive traits I shall list several characteristics of the human mind that limit people's ability to perceive certain social or moral facts. The category of moral language will have more to do with linguistic mental processes or with particular cultural habits concerning the use of words. The third category, ideological factors, is related specifically to two major modern ideologies: liberalism and Marxism. I shall show how all these have a way of assisting moral apathy and the tolerance of evil.

COGNITIVE TRAITS

The first in my list of broad cognitive impediments to moral action is simply *perceptual selectivity*. A principal reason why people do not respond readily to eradicate evils could be that they have difficulty perceiving those evils. As psychologists Bernard Berelson and Gary Steiner (1964) have demonstrated, a person tends to see only the facts that fit personal prejudices, theories, and expectations. Conflicting facts are suppressed, ignored, or somehow rationalized (Berelson and Steiner 1964, 578-80). If persons are not trained to recognize evil, to receive it into their awareness, the evil may remain more or less invisible to them. It is true that cruelty flourishes best in isolation—when the cruel acts are genuinely out of people's sight. Cruel acts can also be "out of sight" if people agree to pretend they are not there; for instance, neighbors may not "see" wife beating.

A second cognitive trait (actually a combined cognitive and emotional trait) is the general human *proclivity to be optimistic*. Most people much of the time see the world as rosier than it is. Even when they agree that the world is not too rosy, their presumption is that things will improve. Perhaps one chance in a hundred that things will improve is enough to make people feel that their optimism is reasonable. In the behavior of gambling, such as playing roulette or lotteries, individuals routinely overestimate the favorable odds. Sociologist Lionel Tiger has suggested that such a habit was an adaptive trait in the days of early human evolution, when individuals faced great difficulties (1979, 20-21). In any case, we now routinely upgrade positive indications of hope into general reassurance.

A third cognitive trait pertinent to our search for the causes of moral inertia could be called the *Emperor's New Clothes syndrome*. If it has become a culture's habit to soft-pedal the existence of certain social problems, it will be difficult for an individual to insist on their importance or urgency. Self-censorship operates here: one simply is too embarrassed or intimidated to deviate from the norm. Hence, this behavioral trait may be primarily emotional; nevertheless, it is cognitive in that it prevents the full perception or recognition of social evils. One begins to doubt one's own senses if they are not in accord with the majority's. Occasionally, however, someone breaks out and announces that the emperor is not wearing any clothes; then others can change their perception and join in. This happened, for example, during the 1970s and 1980s, when some U.S. journalists began to claim that it was wrong for their nation to engage in "covert actions" abroad.

A fourth cognitive trait that contributes to moral inertia is *dichotomization*. Humans like to think in either-or terms, and it is possible that subconscious human decision making is done in the mode of binary computers (Pugh 1978, 98–99). Some examples of dichotomization in relation to the evils mentioned earlier are "the opposite choice to an arms race is the extinction of my nation" or "the opposite of polluting the environment is the removal of all technological comforts." Expanding the imagined alternative into an evil as great as the one under consideration makes the options equal and the decision easy. Such all-or-nothing thinking is characteristic of everyday moral thought, but it also colors much ethical philosophy. As Isaiah Berlin (1980) and Marshall Cohen (1984) have noted, few philosophical writers bother much about moral complexities and conflicts.

A fifth cognitive trait that limits human action on social evils could be called *solutionism*. This is the belief that there must be a perfect solution, somewhere, to every problem. And since there is a perfect solution to evil—such as a new type of political arrangement—then we should wait for it rather than carry out piecemeal reform. This mode of thinking is the stock-in-trade of academic theorists, but it is a layperson's trait as well. Susan Meeker-Lowry, who has written on ecology, observes: "It is tempting to sit around analyzing theories and waiting for the one idea that will save us. . . . But as long as we wait for the definitive solution, nothing will change, or rather we will have no say in the changes. . . . [Moreover] if we wait for experts to come up with brilliant one-time solutions, we will simply watch—and help—our planet, ourselves, die" (1988, 10, 20). I believe that solutionism is not a well-recognized

phenomenon and that it gets much of its power from this lack of recognition.

Finally, I list as the sixth cognitive problem the *numbing effects of statistics* on the human mind. It seems almost as though the larger an evil in numerical terms, such as "2,000,000 prisoners tortured this year," the less the emotional impact on the individual. If only six prisoners were tortured, we could learn the names and backgrounds of each and feel more involved in their plight. In the case of Soviet dissidents during the cold war, the *names* of a few, harped on by the Western press, made the situation "more real" to the public. Likewise, some charitable organizations, operating among starving populations, use the tactic of asking people to support an individual or family, whose photograph they furnish to the donor. This allows the effect of one's charitable effort to be felt in a personal sense. In general, not only do large statistics convey a less vivid picture, they tend to suggest that the matter is hopeless. Thus, individuals feel that they might as well *not* try to influence the outcome.

In sum, at least six cognitive traits contribute to moral inertia: perceptual selectivity, the proclivity to be optimistic, the Emperor's New Clothes syndrome, dichotomization, solutionism, and the numbing effects of statistics. These cognitive traits evolved as part of our multifaceted mental apparatus; they did not especially evolve in connection with moral life. Their effect on moral thinking and action is incidental to their usual function. Nevertheless, anyone concerned with moral inertia as a problem needs to know of their existence.

MORAL LANGUAGE

In this section I shall discuss various ways in which aspects of language lead to, or support, moral inertia. These are ways in which words or linguistic mechanisms dull our moral sensibility or help to prevent the expected human response to evil. The first three of these mechanisms result from emotions that probably evolved in connection with other areas of life, namely, religion, authority, and nationalism. The remaining five show how one linguistic feature or another, such as the flexibility of words, or the lack of vocabulary for certain concepts, has an influential effect on moral thought and hence on moral action.

The first aspect of moral language to be noted is the *realm of the sacred*. Some words, phrases, or ideas have a certain aura around them. Whether in primitive or modern religion, there is a sphere of moral belief that is not available for criticism or debate: to question

holy truths is to blaspheme. It may seem odd that I list this as a factor contributing to moral inertia: often the strength of religious belief is an *aid* to moral action. However, the point being made is that some forms of language put *restriction on thought*. Moreover, leaders who wish to control thought can use or misuse religious words or inappropriately conjure up the realm of the sacred in order to curtail people's rational response to evil.

The second item to be listed here is a related one, namely *the force of authority*. In each generation, the subject of right and wrong is not open for reworking by people (in the way that scientific theories are said to be). The existing set of moral rules, whether secular or religious, seems to be paramount and unchallengeable. Our natural tendency is to accept the authority of tradition, and this inhibits critical moral thought. Moreover, respect for authority is entangled with deference to political power. Our acquiescence in the present distribution of power in our society may lead us to accept some of the evils mentioned earlier—torture, pollution, poverty, the arms race. At the moment, I am not arguing that power is coercive, that it prevents us from acting—an important but separate point. Rather, I am pointing out that the very analysis of evil is hindered by a general belief in the rightness of what "authority" says and a belief in the rightness (or perhaps the inevitability) of "the way things are."

A third aspect of moral language that contributes to moral inertia has to do with the *logic of nationalism* or, more generally, with the phenomenon of in-group/out-group behavior. As social psychologists have shown, people quickly form loyalties to the group to which they are assigned (even if the assignment is arbitrary) (Sherif 1956, 54–58). One's in-group becomes the object of praise and devotion, whereas the out-group is fair game for derision and attack. The obstacle that this poses to moral reasoning or discussion is the obvious one—that rightness or goodness is automatically associated with the behavior of one's own group and wrongness is uncritically attributed to the "foreign" way of life. Moreover, if the out-group is a threat to the survival of the in-group for any reason, such as competition over a vital resource, then its badness takes on an even more indisputable quality. I have investigated this "dual code of morality" in my book *Morality among Nations* (1990).

The aforementioned three factors—the realm of the sacred, the force of authority, and the logic of nationalism—are not strictly characteristics of language itself. The language relevant to those behaviors no doubt came about as a consequence of them. Nevertheless, I think it is worth including these factors in the list of moral

language problems since they limit the human ability to approach the problem of evil. In each case, key words set up emotions that curtail further moral exploration.

The fourth language item that I propose as a contributor to moral inertia can be called *sloganeering*. By this I mean the linguistic trait of oversimplification in speech to reduce an issue to its salient elements, leaving out all modifications and exceptions. Many heated debates in our society, such as those concerning abortion and racism, become reduced to slogans. This use of words probably reflects the mental habit of drawing conclusions from a few clues: cognitive psychologists have demonstrated that we do not usually reason logically to a conclusion but use shortcuts, clues, and stereotypes. The relationship between thought and speech is apparently two-way: the very existence of slogans can shortcut the process of thinking as well.

The fifth item I shall call *Orwellian euphemism*. Here a party, such as a government, that wishes to get away with reprehensible acts simply calls them by another name. Unpleasant objects or facts can likewise be rendered innocuous by linguistic fiat, as when devastation by bombing is referred to as "taking out" a city. Orwellian euphemism has been developed to a fine art in the twentieth century. So also the sixth item, which can be labeled *Nukespeak*. Here a government or other organization obfuscates its policies by technical or mathematical-sounding terminology. The effect is to put the subject out of public reach, since most individuals will feel daunted by their apparent lack of expertise. The impression meant to be created is that somewhere there is a group of experts in whose capable hands these matters are best left.

The seventh moral-language problem has to do with the *open-endedness of language itself*. Human language is not tied to a static universe of ideas, nor are words something that reflect objective reality in a one-to-one manner. Rather, language is fluid and open-ended. Hence, many and varied social or moral values can be proclaimed simultaneously by a particular group or even by a particular individual. It does not matter that these may be incompatible; that is, the expression of one set of values does not automatically demand the suppression of another. Erich Fromm has pointed out, for example, that Westerners live with two sets of values simultaneously. The official, conscious values are those of the religious and humanist tradition, such as love, compassion, and hope, but the unconscious values of the social system—property, consumption, social position, fun—are more influential (1968, 94–96). If these two sets of values were explicitly pitted against each other, many people might opt for

the former over the latter, but there is never a requirement that one make such a choice. Individuals can get around the problem of carrying two sets of values at once by choosing their words carefully.

The eighth and final language factor contributing to moral inertia concerns the *unavailability of words* needed to express certain concepts. For example, there may be no word or phrase available to portray the relationship of responsibility and blame in particular situations. Jonathan Kozol, in his study of American education (1980), found that schoolchildren are not given the linguistic means with which to connect individual action to social problems. Events such as war and starvation, he says, are discussed in the third person, passive voice, as though they were uncaused misfortunes or technological and biological mistakes. Linguistically, we do not place ourselves in the center of historical action by saying, "I choose this" or "I am responsible for that." Thus, Kozol notes, because schoolchildren cannot see the possibility of their own moral potency, they will hardly come to exercise it.

In sum, we can identify eight language problems related to moral inertia: the realm of the sacred, the force of authority, the logic of nationalism, sloganeering, Orwellian euphemism, Nukespeak, the open-endedness of language, and the unavailability of needed words. Each of these helps to channel our mental processes in ways that deter moral action.

IDEOLOGICAL FACTORS

The question we are investigating in this article is, Where the majority of people agree that something is evil, why do they not act morally against it? Four evils to which I alluded were torture by governments, pollution of habitats, extreme economic injustice, and buildup of weaponry. Here I cannot attempt to unravel the historical causes of these evils, much less account for all the forces that sustain these particular things at present. Yet I think it is possible to isolate some of the factors that undergird widespread moral inertia in the face of these evils. In the preceding sections I have listed very general background factors—cognitive traits and problems of moral language—that cause humans to be less morally responsible than might be expected. Now let me switch the focus to more specific factors, namely, ideological factors that have operated in two of the dominant nations in the twentieth century: the United States and the Soviet Union. For the remainder of this article, I shall briefly look at the ideologies of Western liberalism and of Marxism, with an eye to the way each one has hampered moral initiative. (Of course,

a large part of the problem is that these two ideologies have existed in a mode of fierce competition with each other; this also will be discussed.)

WESTERN LIBERALISM

Ideologies come about in specific places at specific times, that is, with reference to the circumstances of a particular culture, a particular economic situation, a particular form of government. Yet it seems to be in the nature of ideologies that the values they set up are construed as being values for all time, for all people. This may relate to some tie-in with religious thinking: when a way of life is described as the "good" way, it seems logical that it should be universally appreciated.

The ideology of Western liberalism contains values that were important in nineteenth-century America, such as emphasis on individual initiative, the right of citizens to be free from governmental coercion, and the value of economic development. These values no doubt contributed greatly to the success of U.S. society, and they continue to be honored in the lore without any particular concern for their contemporary relevance. Acceptance of these values is seen by most Americans as a basic part of their self-image. Emphasis on the positive nature of these values may, however, tend to mask their deficiencies, and in any case deflects attention from the worthiness of other values.

The question before us is how ideological factors specifically contribute to moral inertia. In the case of the liberal ideology, several ways can be noted. Michael Walzer observed in the late 1970s that one feature of the cultural ethos of liberalism in America is that moral discussion becomes unfashionable (1978, 11). To some extent this intellectual embarrassment or reluctance to talk about moral issues is part of the overall American dislike for authority and is also related to the "each man for himself" philosophy. Walzer calls attention to two typical liberal approaches to morality that have been personalized by major figures in American cinema: the hard, seasoned, lonely frontiersman and the tough, sophisticated urban wise guy.

The first American liberal approach to moral life is a special kind of relativism. Values, it is said, are deeply personal and private. . . . In public, we can only hold a man to his own standards: honor, sincerity, grace under pressure. These can be talked about, but not virtue or goodness. Moral judgement focused on questions of virtue or goodness is moralizing, the sure sign of self-righteousness, priggishness and hypocrisy. (1978, 12)

The second kind, also a stereotype of the American, involves a utilitarian approach to morality, a sort of cost-benefit analysis:

When decisions are unavoidable, they must be hard-headed, tough-minded, unsentimental, worked out in terms of the actual or supposed preferences of discrete individuals. The standard must be clear—utiles of pleasure, dollars, lives—qualities that can be turned into quantities, so that the ultimate decision is as undisputable as addition and subtraction and so that there is, once again, no room for moralizing. (1978, 12)

In short, the Western liberal ideology can act to inhibit the normal human disposition for moral judgment and for grappling with evil.

A second commentator on liberalism's obstacles to moral reasoning is Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. In his famous Harvard commencement speech in 1978 he noted that the Western sense of what is right or wrong is colored by an interest in what is legal. Such emphasis on legality cuts out whole areas from moral consideration. For example, Solzhenitsyn found it shocking that in the United States oil companies are allowed to buy up the inventions of alternative energy production for the sole purpose of preventing their use. "If one is right from a legal point of view," he said, "nothing more is required, nobody may mention that one could still not be entirely right, and urge self-restraint. . . . Whenever the tissue of life is woven of legalistic relations, there is an atmosphere of moral mediocrity, paralysing man's noblest impulses" (1978).

There are other critiques of liberalism as well, such as Michael Sandel's (1982) view that concern with the rights of the individual hinders perception of the community's needs and rights. This is somewhat related to the classical critique of democracy. As political philosopher Paul Corcoran notes, democratic governments, being formed from the interests of private groups, characteristically lack a moral vision for society as a whole or even a sense of public purpose (1983).

In short, although ideological systems often appear to have much moral content, being concerned with defining the good way of life, they can act subtly to deter further moral investigation. I contend that the three above-mentioned features of the cultural ethos of Western liberalism—sophisticated distaste for authority, emphasis on legality, and exclusive concern with the rights of individuals—are all inhibitors of moral thought and action. Morality *necessarily* involves interpersonal relations and the competing for goods of individual and society; morality also requires some regard for authority, even if it be just the authority of socially agreed-upon principles. Hence, liberal notions, and the worldview they create, do act, at least sometimes, as contributors to inaction in the face of evil.

MARXISM

The "opposite" ideology to liberalism, Marxism, also appears at first glance to have a large, even overwhelming, moral content, yet it too can restrict moral thought. Eugene Kamenka refers to the familiar picture of Karl Marx as "an Old Testament prophet hurling anathemas at bourgeois civilization and exposing its inhumanity, exploitation, hypocrisy and greed" (1986, 20). Marx himself had written in 1844 that the "essential sentiment of criticism is *indignation:* its essential activity is *denunciation*" (Kamenka 1986, 20). But Marx later changed his approach, from denouncing the immorality of capitalism, to proclaiming that it would come to an end through its own internal difficulties. Karl Popper wrote, "Marx's hatred of hypocrisy . . . together with his amazing optimism led him to veil his moral beliefs behind historicist formulations" (1945, 206-7). Whereas, for Hegel, "might is right," for Marx "the coming might is right." This purported scientific certainty about the future, Popper notes, leads to a scorn for human reason and an appeal to violence.

Just as the United States prides itself on its championship of human rights, Marxist societies (if any survive) can deservedly rest their reputations on their general crusade for social justice. Yet the Marxist ideology has led to an even greater rigidity and exclusiveness of moral thinking than the liberal ideology. Steven Lukes noted in 1985 that in the USSR and Eastern Europe, "both marxist and moral vocabulary have become wholly devalued, the worthless currency of an empty rhetoric" (quoted in Kamenka 1986, 20). This probably has much to do with the inherent dogmatism of Marxist-Leninist theory, with its demand for party discipline, and with the inconsistency between the dream and the reality of a socialist state. However, two further aspects of this ideology can be singled out as specific contributors to moral inertia. The first of these is Marxism's *lack of a theory of the state,* and the second is its *lack of a theory of ethics.*

Allow me to elaborate. John Hoffman (1984), echoing Antonio Gramsci, points out that a great paradox of Marxism is that it lacks a theory of the state. Marxism restricts politics to mere superstructure (or epiphenomena) of the ownership of the means of production. In doing so, it denies any autonomous realm for political activity. Thus, for example, the concept of a power-hungry leader is not available for analysis in this tradition; it has to be ignored. Similarly, Marxism was never able to absorb Robert Michels's pertinent observation ([1903] 1958) that an "iron law of oligarchy" is likely

to operate in socialist parties. Moreover, the failure of Marxism to deal in any way with the issue of consent by the governed is notorious. As Colletti declared, any political theory that neglects the question of consent will facilitate leaderships that, as in much of the Communist world, exercise power "without any control by the masses over whom they rule" (1977, 315). In short, repression by the state is simply a nonissue where there is no theory of the state.

The second problem is that Marxism does not have a philosophy of ethics that defines one's duties to one's fellows. Rather, as George G. Brenkert points out, Marxism contains a strong ethics of virtue. Like many of the Greek philosophies, Marxism questions which ways of life are worthy of humankind (1983, 12–13). Thus, Marx wrote, "The moral law . . . has to be expressed in the form 'be this,' not in the form 'do this' " (Brenkert 1983, 17). Most likely Marx would not have felt that this lack of a practical ethics was a failing in his work. On the contrary, he held adamantly that ethics cannot be rationally imposed on people where the structure of society goes against it. It is the essence of Marx's critical theory that persons operate in a social context of which they are not consciously aware. Again, however, by concentrating only on the ideal future system, Marx denied his followers the means by which to criticize, piecemeal, the social relations of their present. Indeed, he caused them to have to abandon the wisdom of traditional morality. A remarkable example is that it has taken half a century for some Marxists to find the words in which to charge Stalin with moral blame for his murder of millions of Russians. Since Stalin was acting for the revolution—for the future—it was as though his deeds could not be wrong.

In short, during its years of prominence as an ideology, Marxism managed to deflect a huge amount of debate by leaving political behavior as such out of its basic analysis and by concentrating so intently on the future ethical ideal as to render present social relations unfit for critical discussion.

NATIONALIST COMPETITION

So far I have suggested that various intrinsic features of both the Western liberal ideology and the Marxist ideology contribute to moral inertia. But, I should add, the fact that two powerful nations held these ideologies and pointed to each other's ideology as a foremost evil made their respective systems become even *more* intellectually rigid. Over time, each develops a caricature of its own position. Moreover, when nations are in a state of constant military preparedness vis-à-vis each other, criticism of one's ideology from

within can be considered treasonable. Happily, as I write, this situation is changing in regard to the United States and the Soviet Union.

At the very least there is self-censorship on both sides. If something is part of the enemy's intellectual kit—for example, the "liberal enemy's" concern with civil rights—it must, almost automatically, be given no consideration by the other side. Just as many Americans go into an irrational frame of mind when they encounter "communism," the mere thought of "capitalism" is enough to shut down some of the Marxists' cerebral processes. This habit may be related to the cognitive trait of dichotomization, mentioned earlier, whereby all thinking must be either-or. It is also reminiscent of nationalist thinking, in which one's own group is unquestionably considered to be morally superior and the other group is thought to be villainous— with or without evidence.

Thus I claim that the very competition between the two historical ideologies has stunted the development of the moral tradition on either side. (Where might America's moral-intellectual energy have been directed over the last several decades if it had not been burdened with the preoccupation of "fighting communism"?) An equally serious problem is the way in which the existence of an evil enemy has exempted both nations' international behavior from *domestic* moral scrutiny. The logic of nationalism here is that any action taken to counter the evil enemy is itself "good"—even if by any other standard of moral judgment it would be bad. For example, the United States frequently found itself helping Third World governments put down popular organizations (such as trade unions) in the interest of preserving freedom (Herman 1982, 207–8). The logic of superpower confrontation has at times gone so far as to support the idea that to risk the extinction of the human species is a lesser evil than to let down our guard with the enemy. Only in recent years have ethical thinkers started to cut through this absurdity, for instance, by reviving the traditional Christian moral philosophy that states that the ends cannot justify all means (Beitz 1988, 219–36).

In sum, ideological factors have an influence, perhaps an overwhelming influence, on moral inertia. Ideologies are deemed sacrosanct because they define the "good life" and because they give self-identity to a nation. Yet, as we have seen, they are always deficient models; by playing up one factor they leave another out of consideration, perhaps even out of perception. Liberals overemphasize the individual, forgetting the community, and also overemphasize legality, sometimes forsaking moral principle. Marxists overemphasize economic determinism, neglecting the significance

of political power, and also overemphasize the virtue of the future system, rather than articulating an ethics for existing social relations.

Instead of each ideology seeing itself as lopsided, needing the balance of the other, each customarily proclaims the other ideology to be simply wrong and sinister. The United States and the Soviet Union stayed in more or less hostile confrontation for decades, for reasons purportedly having to do with their ideological differences. That state of enmity stiffened each ideology in a way that helped to perpetuate social evils—namely, by preventing the citizens' normal moral sensibilities from running their course. Thus, both the nature of ideologies and their entanglement with the force of nationalism have helped to constrain moral reasoning and inhibit moral action.

In the wake of the "fall of the Wall" in late 1989, and the demise of the cold war generally, we should expect to see a great flourishing of eclectic ideas that are integrative of these two ideologies.

OTHER EXPLANATIONS

This search for the causes of moral inertia was conducted against a background assumption that moral action is normal and moral inertia is peculiar. The explanations for moral inertia listed here concerned rather neutral or accidental items: cognitive, linguistic, and ideological factors. I ignored the category of "human badness" as an explanation for the lack of moral action. The reader will realize, however, that it is more customary to cite human badness as the main explanation for moral inertia. "Why don't people fight evil?" "Because they are selfish, lazy, greedy, cowardly, and so forth."

Certainly I would not refute the argument that human badness is an important contributor to moral inertia. "Negative" human traits must account in large part for the persistence of the four evils named above. For example, the basic selfishness of humans could account for the fact that extreme economic injustice is allowed to continue, and could also account for environmental pollution. The basic fearfulness of humans could explain why weaponry tends to develop out of control and why vehement protests against torture are lacking.

I acknowledge that I have deliberately omitted, as an explanation for moral inertia, the bigness and anonymity of modern society. Social life today is perhaps structured in such a way as to cut the individual out of much decision making. Indeed, decisions often seem to be made by the "internal logic" of organizations rather than by human beings. Nevertheless, persons who are genuinely interested in the phenomenon of moral inertia should not be content solely

with these all-encompassing explanations. There *are* other factors, and it would be my guess that some of the ones named above—the cognitive, linguistic, and ideological factors—have a great effect on the limiting of moral action.

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