

The Exploitation Problem

Forthcoming in *The Journal of Political Philosophy*

Joe Horton

Philosophy, University College London

1. Introduction

Suppose that a stranger will go blind unless you give him \$1,000 for a medical treatment. Are you morally required to give him this money?¹ Most of us seem to think not, at least if our actions are any guide to our moral beliefs. For we face similar decisions every day. We know that by making a relatively small donation to charity, we could prevent a great deal of suffering, and yet we spend our money on other things.

Suppose next that you could strike a deal with the stranger. If he agrees to work in a factory producing textiles for your shop, working sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, with no breaks, in dangerous conditions, you will pay him \$10 a day, and then, after a hundred days, he will have earned enough to pay for the medical treatment. Since the stranger has no other offers, and the alternative is going blind, he is keen to take the job. Is it morally permissible for you to strike this deal? Most of us seem to think not. We say that employers who treat their workers in this way are exploitative. We label their factories ‘sweatshops’, and we are reluctant to purchase the goods that these factories produce, even when alternatives are much more expensive.

Many people gave me helpful comments on this essay, or discussed the arguments with me. I am especially grateful to Alexander Dietz, Mollie Gerver, Abelard Podgorski, Theron Pummer, Jonathan Quong, Mark Schroeder, Robert Simpson, Thomas Sinclair, two anonymous reviewers at this journal, the participants in a research workshop at University College London, and audiences at the Oxford Global Priorities Institute, the Oxford Moral Philosophy Seminar, and the Warwick Centre for Ethics, Law, and Public Affairs.

¹ I assume here and in the cases that follow that what you do will not affect any third party.

There might be a problem here. We seem to think both that (1) it is permissible for you not to help the stranger, and that (2) it is wrong for you to exploit the stranger. These claims together imply that (3) you ought to let the stranger go blind rather than exploit him, even though he would much rather be exploited. Some people find this implication very counterintuitive.² We can call this *the exploitation problem*.

If we want to avoid (3), we must reject either (1) or (2).³ It is tempting to reject (1), but that seems to push us towards a counterintuitively demanding moral view, on which we

² Richard Arneson formulates the problem as follows: ‘Any plausible non-consequentialist morality will allow that people are not always obligated to do whatever would bring about the best outcome. We are often permitted to pursue our own projects even when others we could help are thereby left badly off. If we combine this idea with a moral rule against exploiting others, we are committed to the claim that given a choice between (a) having nothing at all to do with Smith or (b) engaging in mutually beneficial voluntary cooperation from which Smith gains unfairly little benefit, it follows that often it would be perfectly morally acceptable, not wrong at all, to choose course (a) but unfair and morally wrong to choose course (b). Morality then dictates that one should act in a way that would leave all affected parties worse off compared to an alternative course of action one could instead take. A candidate morality that has this implication is perverse.’ See Arneson, ‘Exploitation and Outcome’, *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 12 (2013): 392–412, at 393–394. This problem, or something close, is also discussed in Alan Wertheimer, *Exploitation* (Princeton University Press, 1996): 289–293; Matt Zwolinski, ‘Sweatshops, Choice, and Exploitation’, *Business Ethics Quarterly* 17 (2007): 689–727; Matt Zwolinski, ‘The Ethics of Price Gouging’, *Business Ethics Quarterly* 18 (2008): 347–378; Benjamin Powell and Matt Zwolinski, ‘The Ethical and Economic Case Against Sweatshop Labor: A Critical Assessment’, *Journal of Business Ethics* 107 (2012): 449–472; Benjamin Ferguson, ‘The Paradox of Exploitation’, *Erkenntnis* 81 (2016): 951–97; and Erik Malmqvist, ‘Better to Exploit than to Neglect? International Clinical Research and the Non-Worseness Claim’, *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 34 (2017): 474–488. Many of these writers focus not on the conclusion that you ought to not interact rather than exploit, as Arneson and I do, but instead on the conclusion that the outcome in which you exploit is worse than the outcome in which you do not interact. I focus on the former conclusion because the latter follows from (1) and (2) only given the very controversial assumption that morally permissible acts always make things go better than morally wrong acts.

³ The inference from (1) and (2) to (3) is an application of the following general principle: if *X* is morally permissible and *Y* is morally wrong, you ought to do *X* rather than *Y*. We often use this principle in our normative reasoning. For example, from the fact that it is permissible to say nothing and the fact that it is wrong to say something nasty, we readily infer that you ought to say nothing rather than say something nasty—or, as we more commonly say, if you are not going to say something nice, you ought to say nothing.

are morally required to donate most of our income to charity.⁴ Some people have therefore suggested that we reject (2), abandoning the belief that exploitation is wrong.⁵ But many people think the most plausible response is just to embrace (3).⁶ They have argued that, on reflection, there is nothing especially troubling about this implication.

In this paper, I briefly explain why I am unsatisfied with either embracing (3) or rejecting (2), and then argue in favour of rejecting (1). I argue that we can reject (1)—and the corresponding claim in parallel cases—without accepting a counterintuitively demanding moral view. If my argument succeeds, it has practical importance. Many companies currently exploit their employees, and my argument has implications for how they ought to reform.

2. Against Embracing (3)

Many people think the best response to the exploitation problem is just to embrace claims like (3). Alan Wertheimer offers what seems to me the best support for this response. He asks us to consider an exploitative marriage.⁷ He writes:

Suppose that *A* and *B* have a dating relationship. Let us assume that *A* would not act wrongly if *A* were to refuse to marry *B*. ... Now suppose that *A* proposes to marry *B* if but only if *B* will agree to terms that are unfair with respect to the distribution of financial resources, care for the children, the division of household labor, and so forth.

In other words, a traditional marriage. *B* would prefer to marry *A* on nonexploitative

⁴ For a defence of such a demanding moral view, see Peter Singer, 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 229–243; and Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁵ See Zwolinski, 'Sweatshops, Choice, and Exploitation'; Zwolinski, 'The Ethics of Price Gouging'; and Powell and Zwolinski, 'The Ethical and Economic Case Against Sweatshop Labor'.

⁶ See Wertheimer, *Exploitation*, 289–293; and Malmqvist, 'Better to Exploit than to Neglect?'.

⁷ Wertheimer, *Exploitation*, 289–293.

terms, but that option is not available. Suppose, as well, that the exploitative marriage is better for *B*, all things considered, than not being married to *A*. And let us suppose that we really mean better. ... *B* is better off in the exploitative marriage than she would otherwise be, if only because the marriage provides *B* with financial security, the children that she has always wanted to have, not to mention her affection for *A*.

... It does not seem preposterous to say that it is worse for *A* to enter into an exploitative marriage with *B* than not to marry *B*. ... I do not think that the wrongness of *A*'s action with respect to *B* is a straightforward function of the effect of *A*'s action on *B*'s welfare. Relationships create a new moral context, a different moral baseline, so to speak. ... Once *A* starts down the road toward marriage, the moral standards against which his actions are to be evaluated undergo a change. The relationship establishes new possibilities, and *A* cannot simply insist that his actions be evaluated against the old standards rather than the new ones. Any transaction or relationship that creates a social surplus gives rise to a new moral feature—fairness or unfairness—that does not arise outside of that transaction or relationship.

If we can plausibly accept that it is worse for *A* to enter into an exploitative marriage with *B* than not to marry *B*, Wertheimer contends, then we can plausibly accept claims like (3).

Wertheimer is surely right that whether *A* acts permissibly depends on more than simply how *A*'s act affects *B*'s welfare. There are many examples in which acts are wrong even though they are better for everyone they affect. It can be wrong to lie, for example, even when the truth would only hurt. But this observation does not for me reduce the counterintuitiveness of the implication that *A* ought not to marry *B* rather than enter into an exploitative marriage with *B*, especially when we make explicit what is implicit in the stipulation that 'the exploitative marriage is better for *B*, all things considered, than not being

married to *A*.⁸ If *A* does not marry *B*, *B* will never get married; *B* will remain poor, without companionship, and without the children that she has always wanted to have. With these details in mind, the implication that *A* ought not to marry *B* rather than enter into an exploitative marriage with *B* seems to me no less counterintuitive than (3).

Of course, even if we find (3) counterintuitive, we might still come to embrace it, for the alternatives might be even less plausible. But I will argue that there is a better option.

3. Against Rejecting (2)

Some people have suggested that we respond to the exploitation problem by rejecting (2), abandoning the belief that exploitation is wrong. Benjamin Powell and Matt Zwolinski defend this response. They argue that, at least when exploitation is mutually advantageous, consensual, and without negative externalities, it cannot be morally worse than non-interaction.⁹

I am very reluctant to abandon the belief that exploitation is wrong, even in cases where it is consensual and mutually advantageous. I suspect many other people will feel the same. But perhaps there is a way to make this response more attractive. We could deny that it is wrong for you to exploit the stranger while also holding that, nevertheless, exploiting the stranger would reveal your bad character and make you blameworthy.¹⁰

The trouble with this suggestion is that, if it is not wrong for you to exploit the stranger, it is not clear why doing so would necessarily make you blameworthy. It might be

⁸ Powell and Zwolinski make a similar point in ‘The Ethical and Economic Case Against Sweatshop Labor’, 470. For further discussion and criticism of Wertheimer’s argument, see Zwolinski, ‘Sweatshops, Choice, and Exploitation’, 708–710; and Zwolinski, ‘The Ethics of Price Gouging’, 356–360.

⁹ Powell and Zwolinski, ‘The Ethical and Economic Case Against Sweatshop Labor’. Also see Zwolinski, ‘Sweatshops, Choice, and Exploitation’; and Zwolinski, ‘The Ethics of Price Gouging’.

¹⁰ For discussion of the idea that we can be blameworthy without having acted wrongly, see T. M. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame* (Harvard University Press, 2008).

suggested that exploiting the stranger would make you blameworthy because it would be motivated by greed. But many people are greedy, or at least desire to be rich, and we would not condemn them to anything like the extent that we would condemn you.

I am not sure whether I think it more plausible to embrace (3) or reject (2).

Fortunately, we need not decide. A better response to the exploitation problem is available.

4. Rejecting (1)

I said in the introduction that rejecting (1), the claim that it is permissible for you not to help the stranger, seems to push us towards a counterintuitively demanding moral view, on which we are morally required to donate most of our income to charity. This appearance is misleading.

There is a way for you to help the stranger that is entirely costless for you and does not exploit him: you could employ him on terms that leave you exactly as well off, all things considered, as you would have been had you not employed him. This would require you deriving *some* profit from employing him—enough to offset any associated financial and resource burdens, organisational work, opportunity costs, and so on. But any profit from the exchange above what is needed to make you indifferent between employing the stranger and not employing him would go towards increasing his salary and improving his working conditions.

What if the profit you make from employing the stranger is so small that, after subtracting enough to offset any costs to you, there is nothing left to increase the salary and working conditions of the stranger above the original, exploitative offer? In that case, I think we can plausibly revise our judgment that the original offer is exploitative. Though employers who demand that their employees work under such bad conditions for such a low wage would normally be exploiting them, that is because they would normally be deriving

large profits, and thereby taking advantage of the vulnerability of their employees. If you would not be deriving any profit from employing the stranger, you would not be taking advantage of him, and so, very plausibly, you would not be exploiting him.¹¹

So, if the original offer to the stranger is genuinely exploitative, the option of costlessly helping the stranger is also available to you. And not only is this option available to you, it seems clear that you ought to take it.¹² This follows from the following, overwhelmingly plausible principle.

Costless Rescue (CR): If you can spare someone from significant harm at no cost to yourself or others, and without violating any moral constraint, you ought to do so.¹³

CR implies that, at least initially, you ought to employ the stranger on terms that leave you exactly as well off, all things considered, as you would have been had you not employed him. Of course, once the stranger has earned enough to pay for the medical treatment, CR no longer applies, and you may then either end his employment or negotiate new terms.

If we accept CR, we must reject (1), for we must deny that it is permissible for you not to help the stranger. But in accepting CR and rejecting (1), we are not claiming that you ought to just give the stranger the \$1,000, so we are not committing ourselves to the kind of counterintuitively demanding moral view on which we ought to donate most of our extra income to charity.

¹¹ Nicholas Vrousalis calls the idea that exploitation necessarily involves taking advantage ‘a platitude’. See his ‘Exploitation: A Primer’, *Philosophy Compass* 13 (2018): 1–14, at 2.

¹² This claim needs to be qualified slightly, for it would clearly be permissible for you to instead employ the stranger on even better terms (at a cost to you), or to just give him the \$1,000. I gloss over this complexity for concision, but it would be easy enough to add the needed qualifications, and they would not affect my argument.

¹³ This principle is less demanding, and in that way more plausible, than even the weaker of the rescue principles famously defended by Singer. See Singer, ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality’, 231.

If we accept CR and reject (1), we can accept (2) while avoiding (3). We thereby avoid the exploitation problem. And this response to the problem generalises. If *A* is in a position to exploit *B* by taking advantage of his vulnerability, *A* must also be in a position to costlessly help *B* by deriving only enough profit from their interaction to offset any associated costs. CR implies that *A* ought to do so.¹⁴ Once *B* is no longer vulnerable, CR no longer applies, and *A* may then either end the interaction or negotiate new terms. (For concision, I leave this last point implicit in the arguments that follow.)

Many companies currently exploit their employees. This argument also applies to them. These companies employ people who, because they would otherwise suffer, have little choice but to accept low wages and bad working conditions. CR implies that these companies ought to use their profits to improve wages and working conditions up until further improvements would leave them worse off than if they had not employed their employees.¹⁵ By doing so, they would be saving their employees from harm at no cost to themselves.¹⁶

The above reasoning might seem obviously confused, for improving wages and working conditions would clearly be very costly for these companies. But while it would be

¹⁴ A few people have suggested to me that it could be permissible for *A* to extract *some* additional profit from helping *B*—profit above what is needed to offset any associated costs—so long as the profit is not excessive. I am undecided about this suggestion, but accepting it is compatible with both CR and my response to the exploitation problem more generally. If it is permissible for *A* to extract some additional profit from *B*, then not extracting this profit is relevantly costly for *A*, so CR implies that *A* ought to help *B* while extracting no more than this amount of profit.

¹⁵ If we accept the suggestion, noted in footnote 14, that it is permissible for *A* to extract some, non-excessive profit from *B*, our conclusion about how exploitative companies ought to reform must be correspondingly weakened. CR then implies that exploitative companies ought to use their profits to improve wages and working conditions up until the profits they are extracting are non-excessive. Since the profits of many exploitative companies seem clearly excessive, this implication still has practical importance.

¹⁶ Even when employers are not exploiting their employees, there might be moral reasons for objecting to the inequalities between them. For example, the employers might have gotten to where they are by exploiting people at some earlier time, by benefitting from opportunities that others lacked, by benefitting from other structural injustices, or by making use of natural resources that ought to be under common ownership.

very costly for them relative to the status quo, in which they are exploiting their employees, it would be entirely costless for them relative to their non-exploitative options. And this is the baseline that matters to CR. Here is an analogy. Suppose that a child is drowning in a shallow pond, and though you could easily save her, doing so would mean you miss your only opportunity to rob a bank. Clearly, you ought to save the child, and that is because, though saving her is very costly relative to the baseline that includes your impermissible options, it is entirely costless relative to the baseline that includes only your permissible options.¹⁷

It might now be objected that, had these companies not employed their employees, they would instead have invested their resources in other, permissible, and similarly profitable ways. So, for these companies to be no worse off than they would have been had they not employed their employees, they must continue to extract large profits. So, CR cannot require them to improve wages and working conditions much above what they currently offer.

Perhaps this is true of some of these companies. If so, we should revise our belief that these companies are exploiting their employees. If these companies are no better off, all things considered, than they would otherwise have been, they are not taking advantage of the vulnerability of their employees, and so, very plausibly, they are not exploiting them. But I doubt this is true of many of these companies. Paying low wages and providing bad working conditions typically yields unusually large profits. So, it is likely that most of these companies are much better off than they would otherwise have been.

I should stress that I am not here defending the familiar claim that, if these companies continue to employ their employees, they ought to improve their wages and working

¹⁷ I should really say ‘would-be’ permissible options, for the requirement to save the child means that these options are not permissible after all. So, more precisely, what matters to CR is whether the act is costly relative to the alternatives that would be permissible were the act not morally required.

conditions. I am instead defending the unconditional claim that these companies ought to continue to employ their employees and improve their wages and working conditions. It is because my claim is unconditional that it avoids the exploitation problem.

If my argument succeeds, it follows not only that these companies ought to continue to employ their employees and improve their wages and working conditions, but also that any other companies and individuals who are in a position to employ vulnerable people, on terms that benefit them, without making themselves any worse off, all things considered, ought to do so. It might seem that this makes my argument overly demanding. But it is difficult to see what the problem could be, given that my argument does not require anyone to make any sacrifice. Furthermore, I doubt there are many people to whom this claim applies. Not many of us have the resources or know-how to start companies that could employ vulnerable people on terms that benefit them without making ourselves any worse off.¹⁸

Here is another worry about my argument. I have assumed that, if *A* is in a position to exploit *B*, it follows that *B* is vulnerable, and more precisely, that *B* is facing the kind of suffering from which CR would direct *A* to rescue *B*, were *A* able to do so at no cost.¹⁹ But some people seem tempted by accounts of exploitation on which *A* exploits *B* whenever they

¹⁸ An anonymous reviewer writes: ‘I am not entirely convinced ... that few of us are capable of striking such deals with vulnerable people. Anybody who is at least moderately well off and regularly encounters vulnerable people would seem to have plenty of opportunities to outsource simple but somewhat inconvenient tasks (cleaning, ironing, walking dogs, etc.) to these people on conditions that benefit them without suffering loss.’ If this is right, my argument implies that we should outsource these tasks. Since we would thereby help vulnerable people at no cost to ourselves, I welcome this implication. But it still seems to me that, for most of us, organising the outsourcing of these tasks would require more time and effort than is required to complete these tasks ourselves. So, I remain sceptical that many of us are in a position to costlessly help vulnerable people.

¹⁹ For support for this assumption, see Robert E. Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable: A Reanalysis of Our Social Responsibilities* (University of Chicago Press, 1985); Robert E. Goodin, ‘Exploiting a Situation and Exploiting a Person’, in Andrew Reeve (ed.), *Modern Theories of Exploitation* (Sage, 1987): 166–200; Allen W. Wood, ‘Exploitation’, *Social Philosophy and Policy* 12 (1995): 136–158; and Mikhail Valdman, ‘A Theory of Wrongful Exploitation’, *Philosophers’ Imprint* 9 (2009): 1–14.

transact on terms that are unfair to *B*, regardless of whether *B* is vulnerable.²⁰ Suppose that the fair price for a car is \$5,000, and *A* sells the car to *B* for \$6,000. These accounts of exploitation imply that *A* thereby exploits *B*. If we were to add that this exploitation is wrong, we would get an instance of the exploitation problem. We would get the implication that *A* ought not to sell the car to *B* rather than sell it to *B* for \$6,000, even if both *A* and *B* much prefer the latter. And this instance of the problem could not be solved by appeal to CR. Since *B* will not suffer without the car, CR cannot require *A* to give *B* a fairer price.

I think the fact that these accounts of exploitation give rise to instances of the exploitation problem that cannot be solved by appeal to CR gives us a reason to reject them. I also think there is independent reason to reject them, especially as accounts of *wrongful* exploitation, for they imply that there is exploitation in cases where intuitively there is none. This seems to me illustrated by the case just described. If *B* is willing to pay an unfair price for the car despite having reasonable alternatives, it seems to me odd to say that *A* is exploiting *B*, and even more odd to say that *A* is wrongfully exploiting *B*.²¹

It might be helpful to explain how my argument applies to a somewhat more complicated case. Recall the stranger who is going blind. Suppose there are many other strangers in the same position, and you can employ only one of them. Since each is desperate for the job, a bidding contest ensues, with each offering to work for less and less pay, under

²⁰ Wertheimer seems at least tempted by such an account. See his *Exploitation*, Chapter 7. Vrousalis attributes such an account to Wertheimer in his 'Exploitation: A Primer', 8.

²¹ Valdman makes this point in 'A Theory of Wrongful Exploitation', 13. He writes: 'To wrongly exploit someone is to *extract* benefits from him—it is to use the fact that his back is to the wall, so to speak, to get him to accept lopsided and outrageous terms of exchange. The special wrongness of doing so is not captured by a view that considers all instances of excessive gain to involve wrongful exploitation.' See also Goodin, 'Exploiting a Situation and Exploiting a Person', 175. For discussion of the vulnerability condition, see Ruth Sample, *Exploitation: What It Is and Why It's Wrong* (Rowan and Littlefield, 2003); and Hallie Liberto, 'Exploitation and the Vulnerability Clause', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 17 (2014): 619–629.

worse and worse conditions.²² It might seem that CR permits you to accept the offer that is best for you, for doing otherwise will make you worse off than you could have been. But that is not right. If the offers being tabled are exploitative, accepting them is wrong. And when applying CR, we must ignore your impermissible options. So, employing one of the strangers on non-exploitative terms is, in the morally relevant sense, entirely costless for you.

That response to the case might seem too quick. Suppose two of the strangers, *A* and *B*, offer to work for the same, very low wage. If you employ *A* on this wage, you are not benefitting relative to employing *B* on this wage, and vice versa. So, it might seem that, on my view, whether employing *A* is exploitative depends on whether employing *B* is permissible, and thus on whether employing *B* is exploitative, and vice versa. This gives rise to a circle. However, clearly you cannot justify employing *A* on this wage by insisting that you would otherwise employ *B* on this wage, and vice versa. So, what this possibility shows is that, in determining whether an option benefits you in a way that would make it exploitative, we should exclude not only your impermissible options but also any option whose permissibility depends on the permissibility of the option in question.

I should also explain how my argument applies to Wertheimer's marriage case, discussed in Section 2.²³ Recall that '*A* proposes to marry *B* if but only if *B* will agree to terms that are unfair with respect to the distribution of financial resources, care for the children, the division of household labor, and so forth.' This arrangement would be 'better for *B*, all things considered, than not being married to *A* ... because the marriage provides *B* with financial security, the children that she has always wanted to have, not to mention her affection for *A*.'

²² I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to discuss this kind of case.

²³ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to return to this case.

This is a tricky case. For my argument, it matters whether *B* is facing the kind of suffering from which CR would direct *A* to rescue *B*, were *A* able to do so at no cost, and whether marrying *B* on more egalitarian terms would make *A* worse off, all things considered, than *A* would otherwise be. Suppose first that *B* is facing the relevant kind of suffering, and marrying *B* on more egalitarian terms would not make *A* worse off, all things considered. CR then implies that *A* ought to marry *B*, and to do so on non-exploitative terms. This implication might seem difficult to accept. But we should keep in mind the unusual circumstances on which it depends. We are supposing that marrying *B* would not make *A* worse off. We should therefore imagine that *A* does not have, nor will come to have, romantic affection for anyone else, and that *A* has no preference against living with and even having children with *B*. When we keep in mind these details, and also that *B* will suffer unless *A* marries her, it does not seem to me so difficult to accept that *A* ought to marry *B*.

Suppose next that the only way for marrying *B* to make *A* no worse off, all things considered, is for the marriage to conform to the proposed, inequalitarian terms. I suggest that we should then revise our judgment that these terms are exploitative. Again, this might seem difficult to accept. But we should again keep in mind the unusual circumstances on which this judgment depends. When people marry on very inequalitarian terms, this normally significantly benefits one of the partners. But we are supposing that the marriage would not make *A* better off. Since *A* would not be benefitting, *A* would not be taking advantage of *B*. This makes it much more plausible to deny that the marriage would be exploitative.

Suppose finally that the struggles *B* faces without marriage do not constitute suffering of the kind from which CR would require *A* to rescue *B*, were *A* able to do so at no cost. If we accept my argument, we must now deny that it would be wrong for *A* to marry *B* on the proposed, inequalitarian terms, even if *A* benefits from doing so. This is, admittedly, a significant cost. But it seems to me a cost worth paying. We should keep in mind that,

because *B* will not suffer without the marriage, she is not forced to accept the proposal. We could still hold that the inegalitarian marriage, though not wrong, is unfair. And if there can be non-wrongful exploitation, we could also hold that this marriage is an instance.

5. The All or Nothing Problem

That completes my response to the exploitation problem. I summarise my argument below. But before concluding, I want to briefly contrast the exploitation problem with what I have elsewhere called *the all or nothing problem*.²⁴ Here is an illustration of this problem:

A villain kidnaps five children and then hands you two cups of the same deadly poison. If you walk away, the villain will kill all five children. If you drink from the first cup, the villain will let all five children go unharmed. If you drink from the second cup, the villain will let four children go unharmed and kill the fifth.

Since drinking from either cup would mean your death, it is very plausible that

(1*) it is permissible for you to walk away.

Since saving all five children requires no greater sacrifice than saving only four, it is very plausible that

(2*) it is wrong for you to save only four children.

²⁴ Joe Horton, 'The All or Nothing Problem', *The Journal of Philosophy* 114 (2017): 94–104.

But suppose that you are a bad person, and you dislike the fifth child. You are willing to save the other four, but you are not going to save the fifth. (1*) and (2*) seem to imply that

(3*) you ought to walk away rather than save only four children.²⁵

Some people find this implication very counterintuitive.²⁶

It might initially seem that the exploitation problem and the all or nothing problem are closely related, such that they should have a unified solution. I think the similarity is superficial. Since there is no way for you to costlessly save all five children, we cannot solve the all or nothing problem by appeal to CR. And in other work, I have defended a response to the all or nothing problem that does not help with the exploitation problem.²⁷ I think we should conclude that these are distinct problems that require distinct responses.

6. Summary

I have argued that we should respond to the exploitation problem not by embracing (3) or rejecting (2), but rather by accepting CR and rejecting (1). CR implies that you ought to employ the stranger on terms that leave you exactly as well off, all things considered, as you would have been had you not employed him. This response to the problem generalises. If *A* is in a position to exploit *B* by taking advantage of his vulnerability, *A* must also be in a position

²⁵ For a defence of this inference, see Horton, 'The All or Nothing Problem', 96.

²⁶ For discussion, see Theron Pummer, 'Whether and Where to Give', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 44 (2016): 77–95, at 88–91; Jeff McMahan, 'Doing Good and Doing the Best', in Paul Woodruff (ed.), *The Ethics of Giving* (Oxford University Press, 2018), Chapter 3; and Thomas Sinclair, 'Are We Conditionally Obligated to be Effective Altruists?', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 46 (2018): 36–59. For discussion of cases with a similar structure, see Derek Parfit, 'Future Generations: Further Problems', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 11 (1982): 113–172, at 131; and Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*, 16.

²⁷ Horton, 'The All or Nothing Problem'.

to costlessly help *B* by deriving only enough profit from their interaction to offset any associated costs. CR implies that *A* ought to do so.

If my argument succeeds, it has practical importance. Many companies currently exploit their employees. CR implies that these companies ought to use their profits to improve wages and working conditions up until further improvements would leave them worse off than if they had not employed their employees. By doing so, they would be saving their employees from harm at no (morally relevant) cost to themselves.

Bibliography

- Arneson, Richard. 'Exploitation and Outcome', *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 12 (2013): 392–412
- Ferguson, Benjamin. 'The Paradox of Exploitation', *Erkenntnis* 81 (2016): 951–97
- Goodin, Robert E. 'Exploiting a Situation and Exploiting a Person', in Andrew Reeve (ed.), *Modern Theories of Exploitation* (Sage, 1987): 166–200
- Goodin, Robert E. *Protecting the Vulnerable: A Reanalysis of Our Social Responsibilities* (University of Chicago Press, 1985)
- Horton, Joe. 'The All or Nothing Problem', *The Journal of Philosophy* 114 (2017): 94–104
- Kagan, Shelly. *The Limits of Morality* (Oxford University Press, 1989)
- Liberto, Hallie. 'Exploitation and the Vulnerability Clause', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 17 (2014): 619–629
- Malmqvist, Erik. 'Better to Exploit than to Neglect? International Clinical Research and the Non-Worseness Claim', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 34 (2017): 474–488
- McMahan, Jeff. 'Doing Good and Doing the Best', in Paul Woodruff (ed.), *The Ethics of Giving* (Oxford University Press, 2018): Chapter 3
- Parfit, Derek. 'Future Generations: Further Problems', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 11 (1982): 113–172
- Powell, Benjamin and Zwolinski, Matt. 'The Ethical and Economic Case Against Sweatshop Labor: A Critical Assessment', *Journal of Business Ethics* 107 (2012): 449–472
- Pummer, Theron. 'Whether and Where to Give', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 44 (2016): 77–95
- Sample, Ruth J. *Exploitation: What It Is and Why It's Wrong* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2003)
- Scanlon, T. M. *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame* (Harvard University Press, 2008)
- Sinclair, Thomas. 'Are We Conditionally Obligated to be Effective Altruists?', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 46 (2018): 36–59
- Singer, Peter. 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 229–243
- Valdman, Mikhail. 'A Theory of Wrongful Exploitation', *Philosophers' Imprint* 9 (2009): 1–14
- Vrousalis, Nicholas. 'Exploitation: A Primer', *Philosophy Compass* 13 (2018): 1–14
- Wertheimer, Alan. *Exploitation* (Princeton University Press, 1996): 289–293
- Wood, Allen W. 'Exploitation', *Social Philosophy and Policy* 12 (1995): 136–158

Zwolinski, Matt. 'Sweatshops, Choice, and Exploitation', *Business Ethics Quarterly* 17 (2007): 689–727

Zwolinski, Matt. 'The Ethics of Price Gouging', *Business Ethics Quarterly* 18 (2008): 347–378