

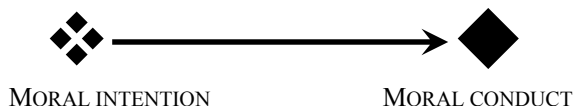
## The Dumbbell Analogy

### Understanding the Companion Flag Project (Cont.)



*Part 4. Unpacking Moral Conduct.* Moral conduct is intentional conduct. We do not as a rule attach moral significance to unintentional behaviors.

Compare the case of a schoolyard bully who strikes a smaller, weaker child in the face, bloodying his nose, with a child whose exuberant toss of a plastic saucer is redirected by a gust of wind such that it strikes another unsuspecting child in the face, bloodying *his* nose. Although the results in both cases are identical, only the bully intended to harm other, and his act is accorded moral significance. Intention necessarily *precedes* moral conduct; or, to put it differently, moral conduct is *informed by* moral intention, and is impossible without it.



Similarly, moral intention (insofar as our topic is human relationships and ‘man’s inhumanity to man’) is based on the moral actor’s awareness of other. We do not think of moral intention arising in the absence of such awareness. Awareness of other

necessarily *precedes* moral intention; or, to put it differently, moral intention is *informed* by awareness of other, and is impossible without it.



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By “awareness of other” we mean *the content* of the moral actor’s awareness of other—what he or she sees when encountering other.

Consider again the schoolyard bully. Without knowing more, can we tell what informed the bully’s moral intention prior to striking the smaller child? To an extent we can. In the first place, we can be sure that it was his awareness of the presence and availability of a victim; in the second, that his victim was someone who manifested human differences other than those which, from the bully’s point of view, would have exempted this person from attack. If this sounds complicated, it isn’t. We need only accept as a starting point the reasonable inference that our moral actor acted toward other in a way that he would not have acted toward every human being, regardless of differences.

For example, let us imagine that our young bully would never consider striking: (i) an adult, or a child much older and larger than himself, (ii) a child of pre-school age; (iii) a member of his own family, or (iv) a child in a wheelchair. That he struck the child in our example tells us that his victim was not seen by him as

possessing any of these disqualifying attributes. The act and the intention to act were informed (at least in part) by the content of his awareness of other.

In every case we are justified in looking behind moral intention to ask, ‘What does the moral actor see when he encounters other? What is the content of his awareness of other? In particular, does he see only the silver sphere of other’s differences?’ The answers to these questions will have a profound bearing on his moral choices and behaviors.

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*A story.* Ilhom Rakhmatov had arrived at the train station early. He was glad he had his book with him as he sat on the hard bench, waiting for his friend, Rushtam, to arrive from Bukhara. The waiting room was alive with activity and incessant chattering; but in the last 20 minutes or so Ilhom had managed to relax, slowly letting go of the tension that had built up over the long drive from the village. He was meeting the characters in his novel again, recalling each with a fondness that approached gratitude.

Suddenly an abrupt noise lifted him out of the story. It was an eruption of high-pitched laughter, followed by a series of strange, rapid-fire utterances and more laughter. Ilhom looked to his left. Edging between the crowded benches were five African tourists—three adult women, a teenager and a child of 8 or 10. The tall, slender woman in front held four plastic bags bulging with souvenirs, fruits, and sundries; her sinewy biceps straining as she lifted the bags high in the air to avoid hitting the people she passed.

All wore the brightly colored clothes and headdresses of their homeland. Their skin was as dark as any Ilhom had seen, and the whites of their eyes and smiling teeth shone a stunning contrast.

Ilhom saw that the woman in front was leading them toward the empty spaces on the bench beside him; in order to make room, he would have to move his backpack from the seat next to him. He decided against this. He looked down instead, pretending to read. *Don't sit here! That's the last thing I need!*

Ilhom hated Africans. His grandmother used to tell him the story from her childhood of six black men, all brothers, who had been hired by her father to work on a construction project near Mashhad. She and her mother had traveled to Mashhad that spring to live with her father at a temporary camp built for the families of workers near the construction site.

When the black families arrived they mostly kept to themselves at the edge of the camp. Their children did not attend the camp school, and were considered “off-limits” by the other children. Things began to go missing from the camp a month or so after the black families arrived. Although none of the articles were ever found in their possession, rumors ran hard against them. Ilhom's grandmother recalled with bitterness the loss of her favorite doll, one her father had carved for her from a piece of hickory for her 5<sup>th</sup> birthday. “ ‘thiopians got it, sure as I'm sitting here’ ” she would explain. When shortages caused by a labor strike in England brought construction to a crawl, her father fired the six brothers and evicted their families on 10 hours' notice. That night, a foreman and twenty armed iron workers ringed their shacks while the

African gathered their things and decamped. “Father was right. It was the only way to make sure nothing else went missing.”

The woman stopped next to Ilhom, the shimmering threads of her green, red and black dress impossible to ignore despite his pretense of reading. “Excuse me, sir,” she said in English. Frowning, Ilhom reached for his backpack and quickly placed it on the floor between his feet. He turned the page of his book, but his attention was now on the movements of the woman and her entourage. When she sat at last, he felt the sudden warmth of her leg pressing against his, and her perfume greeted his nostrils. This is too much! He sat for a minute or two (not quite sure why he waited), then abruptly grabbed his backpack and fled.

Two hours later Ilhom and Rushtam were driving north toward their village, enjoying shared memories and bringing each other current on all that had happened since Rushtam had left for the university. Ahead of them was a large, silver tour bus whose slowing and roaring to life again punctuated the curves and switchbacks of the last twenty minutes.

They crested a pass and had started down the other side when suddenly the bus began to swerve drastically, first to the left, then to the right. The tall vehicle swayed precariously, its tires almost lifting off the pavement. Great clouds of dust and gravel flew up from both shoulders of the road.

All that they could see of the driver’s efforts to control the bus were brake lights that seemed to oscillate at first, then grow

brighter and more insistent with each passing second. Ilhom and Rushtam watched in disbelief as the bus swerved a last time to the right, broke through the barrier, and disappeared over the embankment as though it were a toy tossed by a child.

Ilhom screeched to a stop. He and Rushtam jumped out of the car and ran to the gaping hole in the barrier. They stared down in stunned horror past a rising column of thick, black smoke. The bus was resting upside down some 30 meters below the road. The roof had been crushed in several places, and bodies – four they could see plainly – were strewn about the wreckage. Ilhom stepped to his left and bent down, peering passed bushes and rocks. Through the black, misshapen holes that had been the bus' windows human limbs (some seeming to move tentatively) were visible. Orange flames were jumping from the engine compartment and, below, a pool of blackish fluid spread quickly over the earth like the arterial blood of a whale.

Ilhom grabbed Rushtam's shoulder. "Take the car, Rushtam! Go to the village and get help!" Rushtam nodded.

As the car's engine accelerated in the distance, Ilhom was scrambling down the embankment, half-sliding, half-falling over the loose gravel. He arrived at the bus with both hands bleeding, covered in dust. He stopped to survey the situation and heard the first awful moans from inside. Suddenly, the flames at the back of the bus exploded with a *whoof!*

The fire had spread into the passenger compartment. Threads of black smoke began to rise from the rear windows like

bubbles rising above a sinking hulk. The moans of the trapped passengers turned to weak cries.

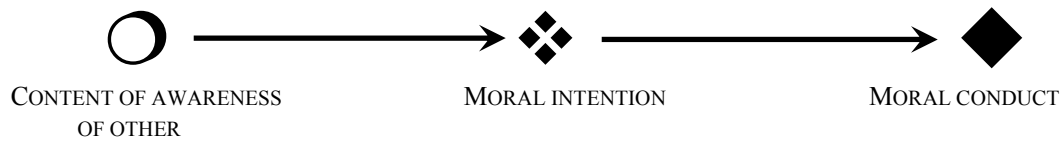
Ilhom knealt by one crushed window frame after another, looking for a way in. He could see no more than a few inches into each blackened space before his view was blocked by crushed metal, twisted seats and seat backs, suitcases and boxes -- a tableau of incomprehensibility. The urgency of the spreading flames worked a strange but effective antidote to the horror that greeted him: protruding, lacerated arms and legs, the faces of the dead behind sliding veils of smoke. Only one window seemed to offer an ingress, but the passage was narrow and black smoke poured out of it in rolling billows. Where did it lead? There were more cries. The flames grew larger. Ilhom plunged inside. . .

. . .Forty minutes later, aid crews arrived from the city and the village. The bus was completely engulfed in flames now, and the heat of the fire was so intense that no approach was possible within 10 meters. Seventeen meters to the east, on a ledge protected from the heat by a towering boulder, the rescuers found Ilhom, his hands and face severely blistered, tending (as best he could) to the seven people whose lives he had saved: two of them, his countrymen, 5 of them African tourists—three adult women, a teenager and a child of 8 or 10.

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In this story, Ilhom (a moral actor) engages in two acts of moral conduct vis-à-vis the same 5 African tourists. In the first, he

dismisses them as inferior, fleeing at the first opportunity; in the second – less than 3 hours later – he risks his life to save them. What accounts for the difference? The answer is: the content of his awareness of other – for it was different in the two instances.



<p><i>At the train station:</i></p> <p>Black Africans</p>	<p>To move away so as not to be near</p>	<p>Leaving his seat</p>
<p><i>At the accident scene:</i></p> <p>Black Africans Human beings in peril Human beings needing help to survive</p>	<p>To try to save people in peril</p>	<p>Plunging into burning bus (repeatedly)</p>

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At the train station, the content of Ilhom’s awareness of other was difference awareness only. When he encountered the five tourists, he saw only their silver sphere of differences: here were black people, Africans, disagreeable types like those his grandmother used to talk about. But at the scene of the bus accident two hours later, the content of his awareness suddenly expanded. It was no longer limited to difference awareness. Here were human beings manifesting universal human experiences: the

experience of being in danger from accidental or contingent causes beyond one's control; the experience of facing an unexpected, painful, and untimely death; the experience of physical helplessness (being trapped). Here were human beings manifesting the predicament of sudden injury, disability, and attendant fear – and the need for help from other human beings. Ilhom saw more than their silver sphere; he saw their golden sphere of human “samenesses”, as well. What changed – what made the difference – was the content of his awareness of other. The tourists' golden spheres were there all along; but only in the second instance did Ilhom see them.



Coming next: *Part 5: Moral Space (Seeing Other)*