

(Notes made following telephone conversation with Louise Townsend, 10/25/02)

Opening Challenge

Imagine that we are having three simultaneous debates: one with a slave trader, one with a child prostitutionist, and one with your friend Karen.

Each of them, clearly, is involved in something inhumane. It is inhumane to enslave a human being; it is inhumane to compel a child to have sex with an adult; and it is inhumane to cause severe harm to a living, sentient being.

So coming out of the gate, we would appear to have a basic prosecutorial case against all three. The only question is, at the end of the day will Karen come out smelling like a rose, while leaving only the others as legitimate targets of our censure?

But at the outset there can be no question that Karen is involved in something quite nasty. If there is any dissent regarding this, I can produce videotapes of animals undergoing medical experiments, including toxicological ones, that I believe will dispel any doubt. This is your friend, whom you have offered to me as a book group candidate. This is who she is; this is what she is about.

Here is another way of thinking of my initial assertion. If Karen were to cause equivalent harm to a human being, she would go to prison, and she would face a multi-million-dollar civil lawsuit. I don't say *if she did the same thing*, I say *if she caused equivalent harm*. I am willing to concede that the subjective experience of an animal being poisoned may differ from that of a human being. However, there is some level of offense against a human that offers parity in terms of suffering: perhaps being kidnapped for a certain period of time; being subjected to certain psychological stresses; being mutilated in a certain way; and finally being released.

Such an action would cause outrage in most people, and I believe you would be unlikely to propose the perpetrator as a book group member, or speak of her in the positive terms you did.

And if *any* of the defenses that you and she have offered to me: "it's what I do," "it's important work," "it's a necessary evil," were to be offered in court of law, I believe they would receive a very unsympathetic hearing.

So why the huge disconnect, both societally and in your own mind, between Karen's history of crimes against animals, and equivalent ones against persons? Is it that:

- (a) My assertion that Karen's actions are equivalent to serious harm to a person is false? Would equivalent harm, rather than kidnapping, stress and mutilation, be something much milder? Say, armed robbery? Date rape? Stealing a wallet? I would be interested to hear your estimate, and hers. Set aside the benefits for the moment. What crime against a person would you consider subjectively equivalent to Karen's against animals?
- (b) Or are our criminal and civil laws just completely screwy? Should it really be the case that you ought to be allowed to do grotesquely unpleasant things to someone else without having to go to prison, provided you consider it to be "important"?
- (c) Or is my initial charge in fact correct: that at the outset Karen's actions are as nasty as those of a slaver or child pimp?

These three alternatives would appear to span the universe of possibility. I invite you to pick one and justify it, or suggest an different theory.

First Defense: Avoidance of Responsibility; Rebuttal

When initially challenged by me, Karen's first response was so say that this was what she did as a career, and this career necessarily involves animal experimentation. As if the fact that one's career mandates a particular action absolves one of all responsibility for it. If this were the case, then a mafia hit man, for example, would be entirely off the hook—after all, his career requires that he do reprehensible things. The point is, we can make choices about our careers, and we are responsible for those choices. This particular defensive move buys Karen perhaps 30 seconds, the time it takes for me to reply that this only shifts our focus from her reprehensible actions taken as an unavoidable part of her career, to her reprehensible action in choosing that career in the first place. It buys her 30 seconds, but those seconds come at a price: it is an early indication that she can not necessarily be trusted to be straightforward in debate.

Second Defense: Benefits; Rebuttal

Her second response was to point out that there are benefits to what she does, which she described well and accurately.

But in terms of distancing herself from her co-defendants, this gets her nowhere. I pointed out to her that *every* act of depredation has its beneficiaries. Her two companions can claim exactly the same thing; the benefits of their actions are absolutely beyond dispute. Indeed, if benefits are the key to redemption, then on this score they may easily have her beaten. The slaver can point to the enormous economic benefits of his trade; while the sex trader can say that, in contrast to the indirect and speculative benefits of Karen's work, the benefits of his business are immediate and irrefutable: the pleasure of ejaculating into a child is heady and exquisite beyond description. Now that's what I call a benefit.

Thus at this early stage, we have yet to establish any moral distinctions among our three antagonists.

Third Defense: Qualitative Differences; Rebuttal

Karen's next move was the wearisomely perennial one of claiming that, well, her situation is different. She seems to imagine that somehow this puts her ahead, but of course it doesn't, because her two companions *simultaneously make exactly the same claim*. And all three are right; every one of their situations truly is different from the others. Analogous situations are always different; otherwise, they'd be identical situations.

And while all three of our subjects may be quick to claim that their particular case is different and unique, it is clear that they have this much in common: *each involves a perpetrator committing a coercive action against a victim, in which the perpetrator benefits at the victim's expense*. This is the heart of the analogy, and in this respect the three cases are incontrovertibly identical.

Being *different* is one thing; being *better* is another. The three situations may be different in qualitative terms, but so what? Any one of our antagonists can exploit the qualitative differences to put up a specious defense. The slaver can say, "Hey man, I don't physically hurt my slaves! I

don't poison them, I don't murder them! Sure, I buy and sell them as property, but I don't deliberately corrupt their fundamental life processes," and, pointing his finger self-righteously at Karen, he can say, "she's way the hell worse than me!"

And on that basis, he's quite right: she really is worse than him. But the problem is, this is a fragmentary and a dishonest analysis. He has chosen to focus on precisely the differences, and precisely the criteria, that make him look good. He is acting like a politician. He has put the cart before the horse; rather than reasoning with integrity, he has constructed an argument specifically to lead to the conclusion he desires. This is not honest debate; this is political pseudo-reasoning that relies upon the dim-wittedness of the audience for its success.

And regrettably, this is precisely what Karen began to offer me. To her credit, I must say that she quickly abandoned this particular line of argument as it became clear that I could readily block it. But whether this is because she recognized that it is fundamentally bogus, or whether it was because she realized she was faced with an intelligent opponent and just couldn't get away with it, I cannot say.

Fourth Defense: Re-Labeling of Benefits; Rebuttal

The remainder of our conversation consisted, essentially, of Karen re-stating that her work has benefits, though this was re-stated in various indirect forms and guises. For example, towards the end of our talk she said that she felt that she was doing "important work." But this is no more than semantic sleight of hand, tedious and wearisome to have to answer. Why is it important? What makes anything important? Answer: because it is what we want, in turn because it benefits us greatly. Back to the benefits, freely acknowledged 40 minutes ago. Benefits may be big, and benefits may be small, but despite Karen's attempt to relabel them with lofty phrases such as "important work," that is all that they remain.

Current Status of the Debate

But in any event, at the end of several rounds of argument, our three subjects remain on exactly the same footing. All three are doing something harmful to others; all three can claim substantial benefits; all three can generate specious defensive arguments on the basis of qualitative differences; and all three can use semantics to re-label what they do to make it sound like something loftier than what it really is: expedience, pure and simple.

At this point in the debate, I think we may agree, Karen has yet to distance herself from moral equivalence to a slave trader, or a child prostitutionist.

And this, essentially, is where the debate remains. My logic appears to be quite sound, and though Karen and I continued our debate at some length, she proved quite unable to refute this simple assertion of mine, as do you. I have yet to hear any coherent rebuttal to this. If either of you has one, I'd like to hear it.

Some other nonsense: at one point she asserted her intention to continue what she was doing. As if this, in and of itself, makes everything all right. Have you ever heard a politician, defensively cornered, declaim emphatically, "I'm *proud* of my record regarding such and such"? There is a word for this; the word is bluster. Must I really explain how empty this kind of statement is?

Final Extrication

Here is how things came to an end. I had made a simple, clear challenge to her position, which she had been unable to rebut effectively. Instead, she had moved from one weak defensive position to another, every one of which I had been able to confute. So how does she extricate herself from this uncomfortable position? She sweeps all the pieces off the board by saying, “Well, you know, we’re never going to agree. It’s just one of those hopelessly insoluble arguments, like Pro-Life versus Pro-Choice.”

So faced with an intelligent, articulate and relentless challenge, her ultimate refuge is this: to discredit debate as a worthwhile endeavor. It’s just one of the great mysteries of life; nobody’s wrong, nobody’s right; we don’t see eye to eye; that’s just the way it is; go figure.

Meta-Challenges

If Karen thinks this puts an end to my challenge to her, she is mistaken. I now have to ask two things. First, why did she engage me in debate in the first place? Why not say at the outset, “No matter what arguments you present, no matter with what extraordinary skill you present them, I will not budge from my position. I don’t function on the basis of dialectic at all; I am utterly wedded to my ideas regardless of outside influence. So save yourself the 40 minutes.”

The answer, of course, is that this is what people almost always do. They indulge in debate until it becomes clear that things are going very badly, then they abandon it in favour of some other strategic option. Clearly, you can do very well in debate if you simply ignore the difficult or troublesome elements of your opponent’s argument. And if you are faced with someone particularly difficult, your best option is to ignore his argument in its entirety.

“She’s a scientist, smart and thoughtful, and really loves to be challenged.”

Oh really. Genuinely smart and thoughtful people do not offer bogus arguments, and they do not abandon debate when it goes against them. And people who are living their lives in humane ways have no need to.

Second, I have to wonder if Karen extends this same generous indulgence to *all* controversy. Apartheid? Purdah? Female clitorrectomy? Does she regard all of these things as insoluble arguments, with no right or wrong answers? Is everything ultimately immune to reasoned analysis and debate? Or just those arguments that she cannot win?

Clearly, this cop-out of hers is bullshit. There are things that are undeniably vile and obscene, despite the efforts of their apologists. Slavery is one. Child prostitution is another. Vivisection is a third. These and other evil institutions can be, and are, defended. And when the defenders of such institutions come up against an intractable argument, they are inclined to sigh and say, “Well, you know, it’s complicated.” Perhaps. But complicated is one thing; insoluble is another. These things can still be analyzed truthfully and objectively, and honest conclusions can be reached.

I suggest that Karen must make a decision and live by it. Does she respect the power and validity of dialectic, or not? If so, then she must answer my argument. If not, then she must forbear to offer a dialectical challenge to anyone, about anything, ever.

Meta-Challenges: Conflict of Interest

It is not surprising that the most persistent defenders of any institution, good or bad, are those who profit from it *personally*. And Karen unquestionably profits greatly from the institution that she defends. Consider all that she is getting:

- Deep intellectual gratification. The processes of life are wonderfully complex, and it is a great privilege to explore its endless grace and beauty. She loves her work.
- Prestige, respect, self-image. We are social animals, and are greatly influenced by how other perceive us; by how we see ourselves in the eyes of others. Karen has a self-image that is as important to her as the rest of us: wife and mother, an enlightened woman of the millennium who does important work in the day and reads Harry Potter to her children at night. Like the rest of us, she craves the respect and validation of others, and the badge of her scientific work helps her to get it. For sure she gets it from you.
- The feeling of complacent well-being that derives from idea that she is helping others. As social creatures we can feel warm and fuzzy about ourselves if we see ourselves as doing something important and beneficial to society at large. (And though it is true that at a certain time and place she is helping others, the fact that at another time and place she is greatly harming others, somehow doesn't factor into the equation. This is the sort of creative moral book-keeping that keeps her bottom line looking good. It isn't just the Enron accountants that cook the books.)
- The paycheck.

That's quite a package. It is clear that Karen profits richly from the suffering of her victims. And this leads to two more challenges.

First, it reveals that she has a massive conflict of interest. So massive, in fact, that it is preposterous to trust that anything she says about the matter is necessarily honest or objective. In any other context—business, legal, financial—the idea that someone with such a huge vested interest can provide fair stewardship would be considered laughable. Allowing Karen to formulate her own policy and then act upon it, really, is putting the fox in charge of the henhouse.

And second, it reveals the staggering hypocrisy of her assertion that she is doing this for external, altruistic reasons—not to benefit herself, she claims, but to benefit others. You may choose to believe this ludicrous statement but I most certainly do not: it is clear to me that she is doing it to please herself.

If someone is doing something ugly, no matter who, or what, or where, and you challenge them, something will come out of their mouth. Always. A politician, a despot, a tobacco company CEO, a vivisectionist, no matter. I challenged Karen, and something came out of her mouth. I invite you to challenge her yourself, and listen carefully to what she has to say.

Someday, perhaps, as they discover painful knowledge about the world, one of her children may ask, "Mom, have you ever participated in experiments upon animals?" And at that time too something will come out of her mouth, to which her own child will be witness. My expectation is that she will reel off the same trite justifications that she offered me, against which her daughter, unlike myself, will be powerless.

Challenges for Louise

Well, enough about Karen. But since you have also engaged me in debate, I have some challenges for you too.

It seems that you are very willing to countenance and justify Karen's work. In support of her activities you characterized them to me as a "necessary evil." Let me begin by asking you, necessary for what? Necessity isn't an absolute; things are always necessary in reference to other things. Animal experimentation is not an absolute necessity; if we didn't do it the Earth would surely continue in its orbit. Here is what we can say for sure: animal experimentation is *necessary for us to get certain things that we want, and we want those things because they benefit us*. In the same way we may correctly say that child prostitution is necessary—it is necessary in order for men to have sex with children. Phrases like "important work," and "necessary evil," are no more than indirect ways of saying "this is something we really, really want."

We are surrounded by evil, and all of this evil is considered to be "necessary" by its proponents. Let us take the current evil du jour: the recent bombing in Bali. I haven't the slightest idea what this bombing was about, but sight unseen I can tell you this: the perpetrators viewed it as necessary. They knew damn well that their actions would cause distress, but there is an outcome that they felt was sufficiently "important" and "necessary" to justify it.

In fact, the generic terrorist bomber is such a morally interesting figure, that let's put him in the dock with the others. He remains in perfect lockstep with the others thus far, and provides us with much to think about. For example, if anyone can claim "importance," he can—what could be more important than the struggle to free an entire people from tyranny? Benefits, necessity? Man, this guy's got it in spades. And when it comes to relabelling he has everyone beat; he can use the phrase "noble cause," which surely trumps Karen's "important work." So, Louise, are you equally ready to apply your tag of "necessary evil" to his offenses? And if not, why not? This is Question 1 for you to consider.

Next, consider this. For any particular animal—fish, mouse, chimpanzee—there is a stage of infancy or childhood that corresponds to this in terms of our subjective experience of trauma, and our ability to express such trauma. Between conception and adulthood, we must pass through fish, mouse, chimpanzee equivalency; perhaps inside the womb, perhaps outside it. So for whatever animal Karen chooses to experiment upon, there is a stage of human development that rationally, logically, corresponds to it. So how do you feel about toxicological experimentation on such a human being? Would you still use the glib phrase "necessary evil"? And if not, why not? This is Question 2 for you.

Finally, you made the observation that a person's moral value is one thing, but her contribution to book group is another. You observed that would be a pity not to have her in the group, if she is going to be a good contributor. And my response was, well, what about Josef Mengele? What if he wants to be in book group? Given your position, then I assume his moral shortcomings would not be problem for you, and you would base your welcome purely and exclusively on his contribution to the discussion. After all, as you say, it would be a pity not to have him in the group. Do I describe your position correctly? Or if not, why not? This is Question 3.

The Resolution

In seeking to shift someone out of an entrenched view of something, it isn't enough to tell them why you are right. You also have to tell them why they are wrong. You have to take their mind, and you have to focus it directly upon the precise element of their position that is false. Otherwise, they are just going to get confused.

So what is really going on here? What is the fundamental point of disconnection between you and me? Why can I make this apparently reasonable case, but still you won't accept it? What is the missing piece of the puzzle, which will suddenly bring complete clarity to everything?

Well, of course, I don't know. We haven't properly discussed any of this; I haven't heard how you will answer the questions I have asked; and so on; so I cannot know for sure exactly what your position is. But on the basis of several revealing things you have said, I can make a very good guess.

So I will take the liberty of telling you what I *think* the answer is. But at this point the tone of these notes must change; from the confident and assertive attitude taken so far, to something much more diffident and uncertain. We will mark this point of division with a line of asterisks.

What follows is an intelligent guess based on our limited telephone exchange, and some other input. But I have also made assumptions and extrapolations, and I could be way off target. So if I have completely misconstrued, please correct me.

I suspect that there are three major things wrong with your current mental construct. I'll present two here, and the third on demand. I suggest that you are thinking inside two boxes:

- You feel organically different about human and animal suffering, even when the suffering is *completely equivalent, factoring in the differing abilities of humans and animals to experience it.*

You are familiar with the prejudices of racism, but you have moved beyond them. We are all fundamentally xenophobic; it is an inherent aspect of human nature. It is just so hard to believe that those little brown wogs can love their children the same way we do; but our inherent human perceptions are wrong: the fact is, they do. You have resolved this issue for yourself; you are educated, enlightened, you have had it explained to you; and as a result you have transcended your own nature; you have come to understand that your prejudices are wrong: the black and the brown of this world really do deserve the same consideration as the white.

But you remain benighted when it comes to animals. You discount the validity or importance of their experience, just as the Southern Redneck discounts the validity or importance of the nigger. He is stuck in a box; and so are you.

Suffering is suffering; and equivalent suffering is equivalent suffering, regardless of whether black, white or animal is experiencing it.

- You derive your values, not from first principles, but from the values of the environment that surrounds you. What is the difference between a slave owner 200 years ago, and someone who might consider owning a slave today? I'll tell you the difference: 200 years ago such a person was surrounded by a value system that supported his decision; whereas today he would be sur-

rounded by a value system that violently opposes it. For most of us, that's pretty much all there is to it.

You and Karen exist in a society that accepts and condones animal experimentation, much as other societies have cheerfully accepted slavery, human sacrifice, and rodeo. And you accept those implied values, without troubling to question them.

I suggest that this is the fundamental disconnect between you and me; that this is where you are mentally hung up and I'm not: you are organically biased so as to discount the experiences of other species, and you are letting yourself be overly influenced by the values that surround you. On the other hand I am thinking from first principles, and I am thinking for myself.

You have learned to overcome your innate bias against other races, but not against other species. All living things are exquisitely complex and sophisticated, and beyond a certain point of development are capable of subjective experience. And to the extent that any entity is capable of subjective experience, to that same extent it is worthy of our consideration. Though other races may seem like little wind-up toys with their gabbling language, strange customs, and chronic famines, the fact is that if we separate them from their children, they feel grief. And though our prejudices may lead us to view animals as part of our dominion to do with as we wish, the fact is that if we subject them to prolonged and unendurable stress, they go mad.

This is the point of my three questions to you: to compel you to confront the fact of your own bias. In every question you are presented with a pair of highly analogous situations, yet your reactions in each case are revealingly different: on the one hand disapproval, on the other tolerance. In each case the situations are essentially the same, except for a single crucial difference, and that difference is sufficient to tell us reliably, predictably, what your reaction will be. (Well, I haven't heard your answers yet, but I'm pretty sure I'm right.)

It is the fact that you exist within these two boxes that enables you to use the glib and disgusting phrase, "necessary evil" in reference to animal experimentation, when you would surely hesitate to apply this phrase to the Bali bombing, or toxicological experiments upon a human infant. It is the fact that you exist within these boxes that causes you to regard Josef Mengele's crimes as colossally obscene, while you regard Karen's as really, after all, not that big of a deal.

The point of my questions is to reveal to you the stark fact that you view the exact same degree of suffering differently, depending on what is experiencing it. In the case of grievous harm to a human, you consider it to be wrong and there is little more to be said about it—you would give short shrift to talk of benefits, necessity or importance. You would be quick to challenge any suggestion that terrorist bombings might have a justification. "Nothing," you might say, "can justify this horror." But in the case of equivalent insult to an animal, well now that's different, hold on a minute, let's just think about our options here.

You may think of yourself as considerate to others, but clearly, your consideration is heavily qualified. It is a rare human being who is totally without consideration for others. The most hideous of our tyrants are solicitous towards those close to them. But in other directions their consideration is stunted—as, it seems, is yours.

Andrew Attitude

I am dismayed by your reaction to this. We have encountered something truly ugly, and among this ugliness, somebody, somewhere, is acting like an asshole; no question. But incredibly, you have chosen to offer a reproach to me. From my perspective, your reproach is spectacularly misdirected.

Let me tell you that it has been a difficult thing to engage the two of you in this grotesque dialogue. It is clear that I have a coherent, well-thought-through, explicit set of constructs in my head; it is equally clear that you do not. In its place you have a patchwork quilt of emotional responses, in which some things elicit organic feelings of moral disturbance, while similar things leave you quite unruffled. It's hardly surprising I can run rings around you. From my point of view the discussion is rather like playing a game with a child; the moves are painfully predictable, and all can be understood, processed, and responded to swiftly and easily.

It is a painful thing to have to listen to the usual fatuous claptrap coming from you. In offering such claptrap you may think you are making a point but you are not; you are merely betraying the unexamined notions that bind you. When you use the phrase "necessary evil," I know instantly where this comes from and what it says about you. Applying this label to something is not an argument; rather, it is a clear and ringing announcement of your organic indifference to a huge body of suffering. Used to justify the practices we are discussing, it is a revolting phrase. Shame on you for using it.

I understand that in discussion with you and Karen, no matter what my feelings, I must conduct myself with courtesy. But know that there are moments at which this can be difficult.

As I have indicated in two separate places above, most of us derive our values and validation from those around us. And so if Karen is allowed to feel comfortable doing what she does, then those of us who make her comfortable must take some responsibility for what we allow her to do. Karen is able to do what she does because her environment sanctions it, and we are responsible for that environment—you, me, everyone.

As societal animals, it is our responsibility to keep one another honest. It is difficult today for someone to own a slave, and this is not simply because it is against the law; it is also because the rest of us would make him exceedingly uncomfortable. Inviting him to join a book group would create a storm of protest, and rightly so.

If we witness evil and say nothing, then we are complicitous. We tend to think of evil as something strident and noisy, but of course it isn't; it is something soft, and quiet, and easy. It is at your shoulder, my friend. By your friendship with Karen, by your tacit approval, by your frank admiration, you accept and validate her. You participate, indirectly, in what she does.

Those of us who think of ourselves as intelligent and moral creatures have a responsibility to challenge others who may be less so. I am not wrong to make my disapproval clear; it is the rest of you who are wrong not to.

I can understand you thinking I might enjoy discussing literature with your friend; by now I hope it is clear to you why I would not. But shame on you for knowing what she does, and remaining silent.