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The More Who Die, the Less We Care: Confronting Genocide and the Numbing
Arithmetic of Compassion

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In 1994 I carefully followed the reports of the genocide occurring in Rwanda where some 800,000 people were murdered in about 100 days. I was shocked by the indifference of the American public to this terrible news and angered by the refusal of the world's governments to intervene and stop the bloodshed.

I'm a researcher who studies the psychology of risk and decision making. And after the Rwandan genocide, my colleagues and I decided to study why we are so often indifferent to genocide and other mass atrocities and fail to intervene to prevent them from occurring.

Through my research, I've learned something disturbing—and that is “the more who die, the less we care.” Today I am going to explain what our research shows about why we are so often indifferent to genocides and mass atrocities and then offer some recommendations about how we might overcome the mistakes we make in our “arithmetic of compassion.”

But first, I want to emphasize that the indifference to suffering that I shall describe is not the result of the behavior of “bad people”—it results from psychological tendencies that affect all of us if we don't understand how they work and take steps to prevent them from misleading us.

Of course, there are some obvious reasons why powerful nations are reluctant to intervene to stop genocides and mass atrocities. It's dangerous, costly, and difficult, and there are a lot of political risks.

But, in addition, research has identified two major psychological obstacles that interfere with the desire of individuals and governments to prevent atrocities.

The first of these is called “psychic numbing” which occurs when the information we get about mass atrocities comes in the form of impersonal numbers and statistics that fail to create an emotional response in us.

The second is a false feeling of hopelessness that makes our actions seem feeble or worthless even when they are important.

Let's talk about psychic numbing first. In order to understand it, you have to know one critical thing about human thinking. We think in two ways, fast and slow.

FAST

Intuitive

Quick
Impressions

Feelings

SLOW

Logical

Numbers

Calculations

Fast thinking relies on intuition, quick impressions and gut feelings. Slow thinking relies on logic and careful deliberation, often with numbers and calculations.

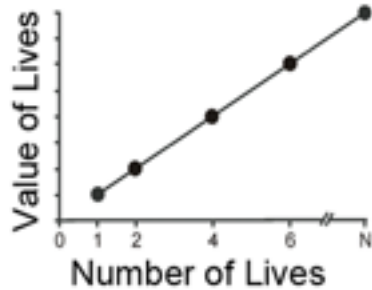
Most of the time we rely on our fast intuitive feelings because it is easier, it feels right, and it works pretty well to guide us in our daily lives.

But fast thinking is problematic when we're trying to understand how to respond to large-scale human crises. Our fast intuitive feelings don't obey the rules of arithmetic. They don't add properly and they don't multiply.

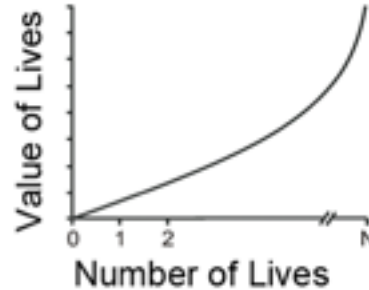
Think for a moment about two questions. First, how **should** we value the protection of human lives? And second, how **do** we value the protection of human lives?

Here are two morally compelling answers to the first question, based on slow thinking.

How **SHOULD** We Value Human Lives?



Every life has
EQUAL value



Large losses are
valued **MORE**

If we believe that every human life has equal value, then the value of protecting lives should increase in a straight line as the number of lives at risk increases, as shown in the figure on the left. This is a simple process of addition.

When additional losses of life threaten the extinction of a people, as in the case of genocide, the very next life at risk is even more valuable than the life before it, causing the value line to curve upward as in the figure on the right.

But our actions in the face of mass atrocities don't follow either of these two models. That's because our intuitive feelings—based on fast thinking—override our more thoughtful judgments.

And feelings tend to be insensitive to large losses of life. Here's what this looks like:

How DO We Value Human Lives?

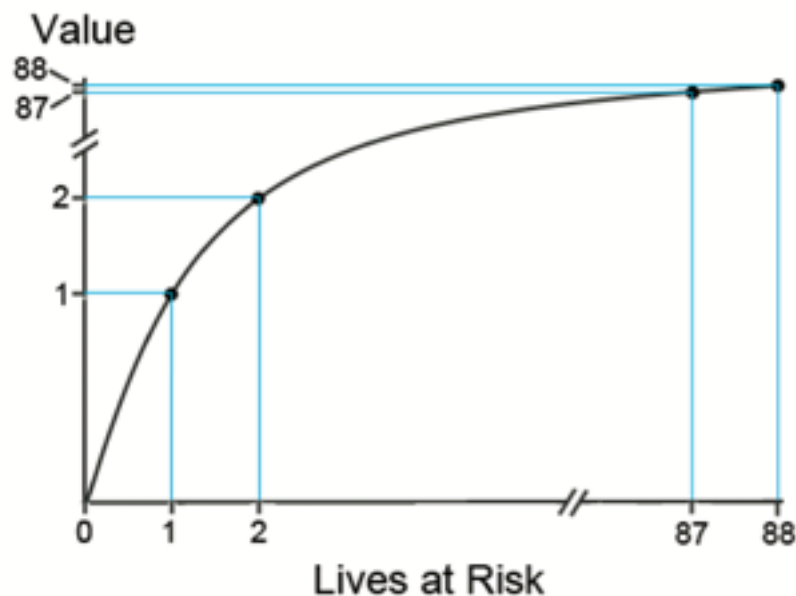


Psychic Numbing



Compassion Collapse

These two diagrams show what research tells us about how we actually tend to feel about the value of protecting human lives as the number of lives at risk increases. The diagram on the left shows that the biggest change in value occurs with the first life, going from zero to one. On an emotional level, we care greatly about protecting single lives. But as the numbers increase “psychic numbing” begins to desensitize us.



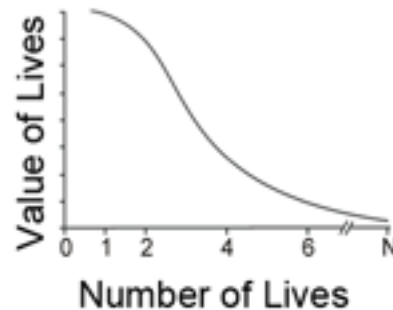
As this diagram illustrates, two lives don't feel twice as valuable to protect as one. In fact, as the number of lives increases, the additional lives feel like they add less and less value and the value curve flattens out as this diagram shows. This means, you probably won't feel any different about

a threat to 88 lives than you feel about a threat to 87 lives. This curve also shows that a life that is so valuable to protect if it is the first or only life at risk, loses its value against the backdrop of a larger tragedy, with many lives endangered.

How DO We Value Human Lives?



Psychic Numbing



Compassion
Collapse

But it gets even worse than this.

The diagram on the right shows that, as the number of lives in danger increases, we sometimes lose feeling and we value those additional lives even less. They become mere statistics, “human beings with the tears dried off,” as someone once said.

In fact, in one of our studies we found that compassion began to fade as soon as the number of persons in danger went from one person to two. We say that having empathy for someone is like putting yourself in that person’s shoes. But what if there are two people?



A Cuban sculptor, Juan Capote, designed a shoe for two people.

You can see how awkward it would be to wear such a shoe. Our minds experience similar awkwardness and difficulty when we try to empathize with two or more people at once.

Just as feelings don't add in the normal way, they don't multiply either. A Nobel Prize winner in medicine named Albert Szent-Györgyi, concerned about the threat of nuclear war, once said:

“I am deeply moved if I see one man suffering and would risk my life for him. Then I talk impersonally about the possible destruction of our big cities, with a hundred million dead. I am unable to multiply one man's suffering by a hundred million.”

This is the perverse “arithmetic of compassion,” It shows that “the more who die, the less we care.” I doubt that this is how we want to feel about protecting human lives.

So what can we do about the obstacle to protecting lives that psychic numbing creates? Statistics of mass atrocities don't motivate us to act, but stories and pictures of individual victims sometimes overcome statistical numbness.

For example, the Syrian war began in 2011 and by September of 2015 some 250,000 people had died and millions were forced to flee Syria as refugees. The world showed little interest in this humanitarian catastrophe until a shocking picture of a little refugee boy lying in the sand on a Turkish beach woke us up, at least for a while.



Within 4 hours after this picture had been posted online, more than 20 million people had seen it. It was on the front page of newspapers all over the world. An example of the impact this picture had comes from Sweden, which took in 150,000 Syrian refugees in 2015. The Swedish Red Cross created a fund to raise money for their care. Donations to the fund averaged about \$8,000 a day. The day after people saw the picture of the boy on the beach, donations went from \$8,000 to \$430,000, dramatically illustrating the powerful impact of this photograph of a single victim of the war.

In addition to psychic numbing, another major obstacle to action is hopelessness- the feeling that anything we might do to help solve a big problem will have little impact- it will be a mere drop in the bucket.

We help others not only because they need our help but because we get a good feeling, sort of a warm glow, when we help them. The trouble is that it doesn't feel as good to help someone when our attention is drawn to the fact that there are others whom we are not able to help.

Here is an example from our research. We gave two groups of people an opportunity to help a starving girl by donating money to a charity called Save the Children. The first group was shown the child's photo. The second group was shown the same photo, along with statistics describing the fact that millions of children in the region were starving. The second group, who saw both the photo and the statistics, donated 40% less. Apparently people didn't feel as good about donating to the girl when they learned that she was one of millions in need.

But it's not only millions of people in distress that can create a sense of futility that demotivates us.

We did another study where we gave people the opportunity to donate money to a needy child. A second group was given the opportunity to help a different child. A third group of donors was shown pictures of both of these children and were told that their donations would go to one or

the other of the two but not both. Donations from this third group dropped by about 25% compared to the first two groups, as did their good feelings about donating.

What we learned from these studies was that people don't feel as good about helping others when they realize that there are some people—from millions to even just one—who are not being helped. Many people then simply give up and don't even help those they **can** help.

This is wrong! Just because we can't fix a problem completely doesn't mean we should walk away and do nothing. This is another example of the perverse arithmetic of compassion that results from relying on our feelings, rather than slow thinking.

So what's the next chapter in this story? I tell these stories about research not to depress people about the strange ways our minds work, but in the hope that if we understand this we can guard against this flawed thinking and create ways of overcoming it and making the world a better place where we are not so complacent about mass atrocities.

Let me just mention a few suggestions based on this research.

For those of you who are refugees in Kakuma and other camps, **if you can**, let us come to know you as individuals! Tell us your stories so we may appreciate your hopes and your dreams, your struggles and your successes. It's important that the world not think of you as statistics.

For those of you here representing NGOs and governments, do what you can to enlist and support journalists, writers, filmmakers, and social media experts to communicate the stories of Kakuma and other refugee camps to the world.

For those of you who are citizens, who care greatly about the well being of individuals but feel powerless to stop mass atrocities, don't let psychic numbing stop you from doing whatever you are capable of doing. When you see statistics representing the struggles of other people, think slowly and try to imagine the lives of some of the individuals represented by the numbers. To paraphrase what someone once said of the Holocaust: It's not that there were 6 million Jewish people killed by the Nazis, but rather one person killed, again and again, six million times.

And don't succumb to a feeling of powerlessness just because you cannot help everyone. Appreciate the fact that that even partial solutions can save whole lives. And amplify your ability to make a difference by joining and supporting NGOs that are dedicated to humanitarian causes and are doing heroic work.

Finally, for those of you in positions of power, recognize the limitations of existing laws and institutions that have repeatedly failed in their promise to ensure that "never again" would genocides and mass atrocities be allowed to happen.

Use careful thinking and analysis to get the arithmetic right and to design policies and international laws that will compel governments to protect large numbers of endangered people with a degree of intensity that respects the great importance we place on protecting individual lives.

The stakes are high. The world will continue to turn a blind eye to human suffering unless we who care understand and overcome the numbing arithmetic of compassion.

Thank you.