

The Tale of the Twelve Officers

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- 1 It was, of course, sad to hear that Ms. K had been slowly raped and murdered by a common thug over the course of one hour and fifty-five minutes; but when I found out that the ordeal had taken place in plain sight of twelve fully-armed off-duty police officers, who ignored her terrified cries for help, and instead just watched until the act was carried to its gruesome end, I found myself facing a personal crisis. You see, the officers had all been very close friends of mine, but now I found my trust in them shaken to its core. Fortunately, I was able to talk with them afterwards, and ask them how they could have stood by and done nothing when they could so easily have saved Ms. K.
- 2 "I thought about intervening," said the FIRST OFFICER, "but it occurred to me that it was obviously better for the murderer to be able to exercise his free will than to have it restricted. I deeply regret the choices he made, but that's the price of having a world with free agents. Would you rather everyone in the world were a robot? The attacker's choices certainly weren't in my control, so I can't be held responsible for his actions."
- 3 "Well," said the SECOND OFFICER, "my motivation was a little bit different. I was about to pull my gun on the murderer when I thought to myself, 'But wait, wouldn't this be a perfect opportunity for some unarmed bystander to exercise selfless heroism, should he chance to walk by? If I were to intervene all the time like I was just about to, then no one would ever be able to exercise such a virtue. In fact, everyone would probably become very spoiled and self-centered if I were to prevent every act of rape and murder.' So I backed off. It's unfortunate that no one actually showed up to heroically intervene, but that's the price of having a universe where people can display virtue and maturity. Would you rather the world were nothing but love, peace, and roses?"
- 4 "I didn't even consider stepping in," said the THIRD OFFICER. "I probably would have if I hadn't had so much experience of life as a whole, since Ms. K's rape and murder admittedly seems pretty horrible when taken in isolation. But when you put it into context with the rest of life, it actually adds to the overall beauty of the big picture. Ms. K.'s screams were like the discordant notes that make fine musical pieces better than they would have been had all the notes been flawless. In fact, I could scarcely keep from waving my hands around, imagining that I myself was conducting the delicious nuances of the orchestra."

- 5 "When I first arrived on the scene, I actually drew my gun and pointed it right at the rapist's head," confessed the FOURTH OFFICER, with a very guilty look on his face. "I'm deeply ashamed I did that. Do you know how close I came to destroying all of the goodness in the world? I mean, we all know there can't be any good without evil. Fortunately, I remembered this just in time, and a wave of such strong nausea came over me when I realized what I had almost done, that it knocked me to my hands and knees. Man, was that a close one."
- 6 "Look, there's really no point in my trying to explain the details to you," said the FIFTH OFFICER, who we had nicknamed 'Brainiac' because he had an encyclopedic knowledge of literally everything and an IQ way off the charts. "There's an excellent reason for why I did not intervene, but it's just way too complicated for you to understand, so I'm not even going to bother trying. I mean, you admit you are nowhere near as knowledgeable as I am, so what right do you have to judge? Just so there's no misunderstanding, though, let me point out that no one could care about Ms. K. more than I did, and that I am, in fact, a very good person. That settles that."
- 7 "I would have defended Ms. K," said the SIXTH OFFICER, who was notoriously careful about staying out of the public eye, "but it simply was not feasible. You see, I want everyone to *freely* choose to believe in me. But if I were to step in every time someone was about to be raped or murdered, then the evidence would be so clear-cut that everyone would be *forced* to believe in me. Can you imagine a more diabolical infringement upon their free wills? Obviously, it was better for me to back off and let Ms. K be raped and murdered. Now everyone can *freely* choose to believe that there is this extraordinary cop out there who loves them like his own children."
- 8 "What are you complaining about?" exclaimed the SEVENTH OFFICER when I turned to him, his eyebrows shooting up in exasperated disbelief. "I just saved a woman from getting raped and murdered last week! Do I have to jump in *every* time I see something like that about to happen? I would say the fact that more women are not raped and murdered in this city is almost miraculous testimony to my goodness."

9 The EIGHTH OFFICER, too, looked frustrated. "Nothing I do is good enough! Do you know how much worse it could have been? The thug actually had a blowtorch with him when he started out, but I said 'No way, not on my watch,' and knocked it away from him with my nightstick. Sure, I let him keep the switchblade, the pliers, the coat hanger, and the vial of acid, but think how much worse it would have been with a blowtorch! Ms. K should have thanked her lucky stars that someone so loving was there to watch over her."

10 "I'll let you in on a secret," said the NINTH OFFICER. "Moments after Ms. K. flatlined, I had her resuscitated, and flown to a tropical resort where she is now experiencing extraordinary bliss, and her ordeal is just a distant memory. I'm sure you would agree that that's more than adequate compensation for her suffering, so the fact that I just stood there watching instead of intervening has no bearing at all on my goodness."

11 The TENTH OFFICER gave us all quite a start when he revealed a surprising secret about Ms. K. "I genetically engineered her from scratch. I made her, therefore she's my property, and I can do whatever I want with her. I could rape and murder her myself if I were so inclined, and it would be no worse than you tearing up a piece of paper you own. So there is no question of my being a bad person for not helping her."

12 The ELEVENTH OFFICER chimed in, gesturing at the tenth officer "I hired him to create Ms. K for me, because I wanted someone to love and worship me. But when I approached Ms. K about the matter, she actually turned away from me, as though she could find meaning and happiness with someone else! So I decided the loving thing to do would be to break her spirit by arranging to have her raped and murdered by a common thug, so that she might turn to me in her extraordinary suffering, thereby fulfilling the purpose for which she had been created. Well, mission accomplished, I'm happy to say! A few seconds before she died, she was so insane with terror and pain that she actually convinced herself she loved me, since she knew that only I could end her ordeal. I'll never forget the love in her eyes when she looked up at me the last time, begging for mercy, right before the thug bent over and slit her throat. It was so beautiful it still brings me to tears. Now I just have to go to that island so she can claim her prize of servitude."

13 "Well, this is quite a coincidence," chuckled the TWELFTH OFFICER. "It looks like the thug got himself double pay, because I actually hired him to carry out the murder, too! Why? Oh, well it was just a test. Ms. K and I had been dating for some time (no offense, I didn't know she was someone else's property), and one beautiful night she finally told me she loved me. So, naturally, I wanted to see whether this was indeed love — that is, whether she would continue to adore me even while drowning in a pool of her own tears and blood, with me standing before her doing nothing."

14 By now, it had become clear to me that any difficulty I might have had in reconciling the presumed goodness of the officers with their behavior that day was unfounded, and that anyone who sided against them could do so only for love of evil over good. After all, anyone who has experienced their friendship in the way I have knows that they are good. Their goodness is even manifest in my life — I was in a shambles before I met them, but now everyone remarks on what a changed person I am, so much kinder and happier, apparently possessed of an inner calm. And I have met so many others who feel exactly the same way about them — so many who, like me, know in their hearts the truth that others try to rationalize away with their cold reason and sterile logic. I am ashamed that I ever doubted the entitlement of the twelve officers to my loyalty and my love.

15 As I was getting ready to leave, the first officer spoke up again. "By the way, I also think you should know that when we stood there watching Ms. K. get raped and stabbed over and over, we were suffering along with her, and we experienced exactly the same pain she did, or perhaps even more." And everyone in the room, myself included, nodded his head in agreement.

Postscript

Religious readers, do not take offense. I have made this parable as brazen as I could, but my purpose is not to insult or blaspheme. I have found that religious believers are often conditioned to accept trite solutions to the problem of suffering, and that it is all but impossible to shake that conditioning through dry analysis. The temptation to offer to an entity a moral blank check simply because it sports a nametag with "God" written on it, is overwhelming in our theistic culture. Hence, this attempt to make the point through a medium as far removed from dry analysis as possible. But again, it is all to make a point, not to cause anyone harm. I have not written anything that I would not have wanted directed at me when I myself was a believer.

Second postscript

I have had many observant people suggest to me additional officers to add to this parable. One could, for instance, add an officer who had refused to intervene so that Ms. K.'s father might learn a valuable lesson about forgiveness or humility. One could add an officer who had refused to intervene so that other observers would be terrorized into recognizing the importance of law enforcement. One could add an officer who had refused to intervene so that Ms. K. could participate in small way in the tremendous suffering he himself had once gone through. One could add an officer who argued that since Ms. K. was less than morally perfect, she didn't deserve to be rescued. One could add an officer who argued that since he wasn't the one who raped Ms. K., everyone in the world except for him was responsible for her rape, and it was therefore wrong to blame him. These are all good suggestions, some of them representative of more popular theodicies than some of the ones in my original parable. I think it best, however, to leave my parable as it stands, and leave further officers to my readers to work out on their own, if only because I otherwise soon would end up with a number of officers closer to that of the Arabian Nights than to that of the apostles. The possibilities truly are endless: for as long as religion persists, diehard believers surely will continue to come up with new rationalizations, each one more rationally indefensible and morally callous than the one preceding it, for the failure of a supposedly all-good, all-powerful god to do even the minimum they would require from any other being who wished to be counted as good.

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About the author

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