



NSDA Nationals 2015 LD Topic Analysis

The 2015 NSDA Nationals LD topic is **“Resolved: Inaction in the face of injustice makes individuals morally culpable.”** This guide will introduce you to some of the core areas of debate within this topic, as well as provide evidence to get you started. When we finish, you should be ready to write super-strong cases worthy of national competition!

This resolution is a refreshing return to a more traditional LD style topic, instead of this year’s spate of topics calling for debate on the desirability of some specific action. You should expect plenty of clash on the value/criterion level, and much less discussion of implementation and solvency.

We’ll start out, as always, by considering what the words in the resolution mean. This topic, however, is very broad and open to interpretation. The best debaters will want to choose their ground with great precision. For that reason, this particular topic guide will be much more focused on the pros and cons of various approaches to the topic, and less evidence-heavy, than usual.



Definitions

First, what is “**inaction?**” Obviously, it is the opposite of “action.” You might define it as “doing nothing.” However, it is slightly more specific than you might think. [The Oxford Dictionary defines inaction](#) as “lack of action where some is expected or appropriate.” While it is certainly possible to do nothing in many situations where doing nothing would be the default response (for example, if someone stubs his/her toe on the other side of the world, and you do not react, that inaction probably won’t surprise anyone; similarly, you could accurately describe a dead corpse as “inactive”), those usages aren’t what is commonly meant. Instead, you should think of “inaction” as meaning something closer to “doing nothing when responding might be reasonably expected.” That said, as the negative, you won’t want to concede that the word “inaction” conveys that acting is always what would have been “*appropriate*,” or that it means one *ought* to act—for obvious reasons!

On the aff, you will also want to consider what kinds of actions individuals must take to avoid being considered morally culpable. For example, if I see someone being attacked, can I just yell “stop!” and wave my arms, and then therefore fulfill my moral duty to take action? Do I need to physically enter the conflict? Adding to the uncertainty, if I am unarmed, untrained, and much smaller than the attacker—and am therefore very unlikely to be able to help—does that change the response morally required of me? Think about your answers to these questions before arriving in Dallas.



Next, let's think about **"in the face of."** I predict this term will be a surprisingly common area of contention. According to the [Farlex online dictionary of idioms](#), it means something like "when confronted with," or "when threatened by." But, neither of those are particularly illuminating for our purposes. The real question will be what degree of proximity to an individual an injustice must occur within before it constitutes "in the face of" that person.

The affirmative will most likely want to argue that "in the face of" means that the individual must at least be *aware of* the injustice, even if it does not occur physically in front of them. That shouldn't be too controversial—it will be tough for the neg to win that all individuals are directly morally culpable for all injustices that occur everywhere on the planet, even if they don't know about them. That interpretation would be wildly unfair to the aff.

Immanuel Kant is typically credited with the idea that "[ought implies can](#)," meaning that one cannot be considered morally obligated to do something if they are not able. Some negs might use this line of argumentation to try to disprove the resolution: people cannot be held morally culpable for things they can't control. Most likely, there will always be injustices that any one particular citizen is powerless against. Strategic affirmatives may want to preempt this by defining "in the face of" as something like



“when an individual has the capability to react.” Again, though, remember to think through what your interpretation of “capable” is.

Let’s dive a little deeper into the concept of capability here. There are two notions of capability that relate to actions: (1) “am I physically capable of doing it?” and (2) “can I be expected to create any change through my actions (in other words, are my actions futile)?” For an example of #1, I am physically capable of selling all of my possessions, keeping only enough money to buy the things I need to stay alive, and giving the rest to charity, even if I don’t find that choice particularly appealing. On the other hand, I am truly not *capable* of flapping my wings and flying to China. As for #2, it is referring to situations in which the necessary action is physically possible for me, but that action will not create any kind of meaningful change. For example, in the above example, if I gave all of my money to charity, but then I had to rely on charities in order to survive (because I now have no money), my actions would not have been very effective. Using similar reasoning, another illustration of #2 would be if there was a horrible, tyrannical king, who constantly starved and tortured his people. Perhaps I am capable of carrying out the physical action of shooting a gun, but that alone does not make me a good candidate to go assassinate the king and liberate his people. I would undoubtedly be caught and executed, and the king would continue on as usual. So, even though it is possible for me to attempt to assassinate the king, it would be a very pointless thing to do. This is relevant to this topic because of the possibility that an individual’s attempts to respond to injustice could make the situation worse—we’ll come back to that. It



also points to the question of whether one is morally required to take action even if doing so will cause them great harm.

The important thing to remember is that affs should be responsible for answering whether individuals can be held as morally culpable for actions that are impossible (using both of the separate questions of #1 and #2).

One last thing: “in the face of” can also mean “despite,” “regardless of the opposition of,” or “notwithstanding” (such as “in the face of my friends’ disapproval, I wore a monkey suit to school” or “in the face of published research, Ronald insisted eating McDonalds for every meal was perfectly healthy”), but that usage doesn’t really make sense in the context of this resolution. Don’t worry about it—I only point out the other usage so you don’t get tripped up if an opponent tries something weird with a sketchy interpretation.

“Injustice” is another important term in this topic. Although I imagine most experienced LDers would not make this mistake, I nevertheless want to highlight that it is important that you don’t assume that “injustice” is something that has an easy, objective definition. People disagree wildly on what constitutes an injustice. For just a few examples: is it unjust for some people to have plenty of money



while others have none? Is it unjust to shoot (and possibly kill) someone who is breaking into your home? Is it unjust for a woman to have an abortion, or is it unjust to forbid her from having one?

Hopefully the above examples shed some light into how differing conceptions of what constitutes justice can be at odds with each other. I recommend spending some time thinking about how you want to interpret “injustice” on both sides. Below, we’ll go over some specific considerations.

One question relevant to “injustice” is whether you want to talk about specific unjust events (such as someone getting robbed, someone being punished for a crime they didn’t commit, etc) or systemic injustice (such as racism, sexism, or any other –ism). Depending on how your case is structured, you may want to make some arguments about how these types of injustice differ, and why one might morally require action while the other does not.

Moreover, there are varying degrees of injustice. For example, you might say it is unjust if I give everyone a cookie, but give extra cookies to just one person. However, this is obviously less unjust than forcing someone into slavery, committing genocide, etc. Both sides will also want to consider *how* unjust something must be before it might morally require intervention.



Finally, bear in mind the distinction between defining justice as a possible *outcome of an action* and defining it as a *principle to be adhered to* regardless of the consequences. Here is an example to illustrate the difference: Billy has 10 apples and his classmates have none, so you take them and divide them up equally. On one hand, you might say that this was just, because now everyone has an apple (outcomes). On the other hand, you might say this was unjust, because those apples belonged to Billy, and you took his rightful property for the benefit of others (principle). That debate is a pretty deep one, considering (as you likely have already noticed) that this controversy underlies a huge number of current political and economic debates. Even more than that, it is an important question stretching back throughout the history of Western philosophy!

Anyway, you should plan to write your cases so that your value and criterion provide support for your interpretation of justice. We will discuss how to do that at greater length in the next section.

The word “**individuals**” is fairly simple. The [Oxford Dictionary defines it](#) as “a single human being as distinct from a group, class, or family.” However, the resolution does not specify “*all* individuals,” so it might be reasonable for affs to argue that some individuals may be morally culpable, while others may not. This would help to avoid the avalanche of counter-examples some negs will hinge their strategy on. That does not mean that affs will find it easy to win by coming up with one or two small examples,



though. It only allows the aff to potentially concede that *certain* individuals, such as small children and people in comas, may not be morally culpable, but the majority of individuals are.

The selection of “individual” also ensures that we are not supposed to be discussing the responsibilities of governments, organizations, nations, etc.

However, there is another interesting interpretation debaters could consider making. Thanks to the American legal concept of [corporate personhood](#), the United States recognizes corporations as having many of the same legal rights as individuals. If you want to get tricky, you could play around with arguing that moral obligations also apply to corporations.

(A quick note: corporate personhood does not actually mean what most people seem to think it does; it is not that corporate success should be valued the same as human life, or anything like that. It simply means that a group of people, united as part of the same corporation (be it a company or a union or a religious organization), can interact with the law in (mostly) the same way as a single person can. For example, corporate personhood is what allows you to sue an entire company if they wrong you, rather than each of their employees individually. Similarly, contracts signed by corporations apply to that entity collectively, rather than just the CEO (or whoever) who actually put her signature on it.)



So, you *may* be able to win that corporations can reasonably be considered “individuals,” and therefore their actions (or inactions) are relevant to the resolution. While I wouldn’t call this strategy anything close to bulletproof, Black’s Law Dictionary does [actually provide some support here](#). However, winning that every natural person (human being) employed by a company is equally morally culpable for everything the entire company does might present a challenge. That said, it can be done... most people do not, for example, absolve anyone connected to the Nazis for the Holocaust, even if they never personally directly hurt anyone.

Another weird note about “individual”: for debate purposes, it makes the most sense to assume that “individual” refers only to adults capable of moral deliberation (i.e. not babies, anyone with any sort of condition that prevents them from “normal” moral reasoning, etc). It would be very hard to win that 2-week old babies are culpable for anything! However, [the US Code of Law does specify](#) that “individuals... shall include every infant member of the species homo sapiens who is born alive at any stage of development.” Further, [tax law repeatedly refers to children](#) as “individuals.” On the other hand, legal “personhood” [specifically excludes](#) minors and those found to be incapacitated. All of that said, the good news is that, since this resolution discusses *moral* rather than *legal* issues, so I would not worry about it. Once again, I only include that information as a heads-up to help you stave off any potential kooky, sneak-attack strategies.



That brings us neatly to “**Morally culpable**,” which is the last phrase we will analyze here. As you are no doubt well aware, how we determine what is or is not moral is very much up for debate. For right now, let’s just gloss over that question and refer to morality as what is “right” or “good” (whatever that may be), and focus on understanding culpability. “Culpable” means “responsible for” or “blameworthy.” The negative connotation of culpable suggests that what the resolution really means is “is it morally wrong not to act in the face of injustice?” You would never say someone is culpable for something *good*. So, in the most general terms, “morally culpable” means “blameworthy/bad for failing to do the thing that is morally right.”

The word culpability is often used in a legal context to discuss whether someone can be held responsibility for a crime or other offense, but—as we just discussed—in this resolution we are only concerned with morality. Something can be illegal but not immoral (for example, interracial marriage was illegal in the United States, but nobody besides huge racists would call it immoral), just as something can be immoral but not illegal (it is not illegal to say deliberately hurtful things to people for no good reason, but most would agree that it’s not a particularly moral thing to do). Make sure you don’t accidentally cut cards about the law instead of morality when you’re researching.



Further, it could be reasonable to argue that negligence can constitute culpability. Earlier, we discussed how “in the face of” may mean that the individual in question would need to be aware of the injustice. But, you might suggest that there are situations in which a person might not know about something, but they lack a credible excuse for their ignorance. For example, if I actively avoid educating myself about the suffering of a particular group of people because the subject makes me sad, or because I don’t think it is my responsibility to care about others, my lack of knowledge may not insulate me from moral culpability. That is something you may want to explore in certain rounds.

Another important question concerning culpability is exactly *for what* the aff is arguing the inactive individual is culpable for. Are they equally as culpable as the person actually committing the injustice? Does it matter if they don’t recognize the injustice as an injustice (and is there even a universal standard for what is unjust)? Are they only “guilty” relative to the severity of the injustice, or is refusal to respond to injustice universally equally blame-worthy on principle? This is yet another line of inquiry to consider as you build your cases.

All together, we can generally interpret this resolution as asking us to debate whether individual human beings can be considered “wrong” or blameworthy if they neglect to attempt to alleviate injustice when they observe or know of something unjust occurring. Probably, we can reasonably assume that we will usually be talking about injustices that the individual in question is both *aware of* and *capable of* doing



something to help, but that may not always be true in every round. Exactly where the lines are drawn will depend on the specifics of each debate.

This resolution largely concerns itself with fundamental questions from the field of ethics (moral philosophy), and ample attention has been given to it throughout human history. Although most seasoned LDers are likely already familiar, let's quickly review the main concepts from this discipline.

First, one important question is covered by the realm of philosophy known as **metaethics**. This is the branch of philosophy dedicated to studying what morality *is*—put simply, is there an objective moral truth “out there” for us to discover, or is morality a human construct? Some negs might choose to indict the concept of universal morality as a whole. We will discuss that strategy more later.

The majority of debate on this resolution, however, will surround subjects from within the discipline of **normative ethics**. Normative ethicists don't concern themselves with the abstract questions of metaethics, but instead aim to lay out a framework of morality by which people can lead moral lives. The 3 main schools of thought are [utilitarianism](#), [deontology](#), and [virtue ethics](#). None of these should be unfamiliar to most of you, but I've included links just in case you need a refresher.



One quick note before we begin discussing strategy: although it is always important to continue conducting thorough research on any topic, it will be *particularly crucial* on this one. This resolution covers some of the most discussed questions throughout the history of philosophy. There is a huge amount of relevant thought and literature out there. If moral philosophy is a new subject for you, I'd recommend getting your feet wet [here](#), [here](#), and/or [here](#), as well as reading pages for the specific schools of thought referenced in this guide. What follows will be a brief overview of a few possible strategies addressing the core of the topic, but it is by no means a complete introduction to all of the material that this resolution may bring up.

With that disclaimer out of the way, let's look at a few possible **structures for building cases**. We will start with some aff options, and then cover the neg.

Aff Strategies

On the **affirmative**, one option would be to begin your case by narrowly defining your ground. As we have already discussed, it would be reasonable to argue that "in the face of" means the individual must be aware of the injustice, and capable of taking action against it (this action doesn't necessarily have to be *effective* to count, it just has to be an active choice to do something, rather than nothing). Further,



you may argue “inaction” supports this interpretation, because the word implies that some action could have been reasonably expected-- no one refers to a corpse’s lack of response to a passionate speech calling for change as “inaction,” for example, but you might use the word in reference to a living person. If you want, you can follow this up by building some arguments about why individuals cannot be considered to have moral responsibility for phenomena outside of their influence/control. Referring back to an earlier example, I might be physically capable of shooting a gun, but that does not mean that assassinating a dictator who tortures his people is something I would be personally able to do, so you might argue that I cannot be held responsible for his injustices.

So, the aff case as described so far would be set up to defend that individuals are morally culpable for failing to act against injustice when (1) the individual knows about the injustice, (2) action from the individual would be possible and perhaps even expected, and (3) the individual’s actions are capable of creating some kind of change. This narrow strip of ground should be relatively easy to defend.



However, if you're interested in defending *hardcore* moral culpability, and saying everyone is responsible for everyone else (without using Levinas—we'll get to him!), here is a piece of **evidence** you can use for that:

(Thomas W. Pogge, Philosopher, Director of the Global Justice Program & Professor of Philosophy and International Affairs at Yale University, "Global Responsibilities: who must deliver on human rights?" edited by Andrew Kuper, Routledge, 11/12/2012)

Fourth, with respect to these moral concerns, all human beings have equal status: They have exactly the same human rights, and the moral significance of these rights and their fulfillment does not vary with whose human rights are at stake. Fifth, human rights express moral concerns that are unrestricted, i.e., they ought to be respected by all human agents irrespective of their particular epoch, culture, religion, moral tradition or philosophy. Sixth, these moral concerns are broadly sharable, i.e., capable of being understood and appreciated by persons from different epochs and cultures as well as by adherents of a variety of different religions, moral traditions, and philosophies. The notions of unrestrictedness and broad sharability are related in that we tend to feel more confident about conceiving of a moral concern as unrestricted when this concern is not parochial to some particular epoch, culture, religion, moral tradition or philosophy.



For most affs, you will also want to have a defense of **universal morality** (although a reason why morals don't have to be universalizable would also suffice). Here is a piece of **evidence** on universal morality:

(J. David Velleman, Professor of Philosophy at NYU, Self To Self: selected essays, Cambridge University Press, pp 32-33, 2006)

Why can't reasons owe their authority to us? The answer is that endowing reasons with authority would entail making their validity common knowledge among all reasoners. And if we could promote reasons to the status of being common knowledge among all reasoners, then we should equally be able to demote them from that status – in which case, the status wouldn't amount to rational authority. The point of a reason's being common knowledge among all reasoners, remember, is that there is then no way of evading it, no matter how we shift our point-of-view. No amount of rethinking will make such a reason irrelevant, because its validity as a reason is evident from every perspective. But if we could decide what is to be common knowledge among all thinkers, then a reason's being common knowledge would not entail its being inescapable, since we could also decide that it wasn't to be common knowledge, after all. Our power to construct a universally accessible framework of reasons would therefore undermine the whole point of having one.



Most affirmatives will probably also want to be carrying a card that says allowing something to happen is morally equivalent to causing it. Here is one such piece of **evidence**:

(James Rachels. "Killing and Letting Die," Encyclopedia of Ethics 2nd edition, pp 947-950, New York: Routledge, <http://www.jamesrachels.org/killing.pdf>, 2001)

So what is the difference between causing and allowing? What real difference is marked by those words? The most obvious ways of attempting to draw the distinction won't work. For example, suppose we say it is the difference between action and inaction--when we cause an outcome, we do something, but when we merely allow it to happen, we passively stand by and do nothing. This won't work because, when we allow something to happen, we do perform at least one act: the act of allowing it to happen. The problem is that the distinction between doing something and not doing something is relative to the specification of what is or is not done--if I allow someone to die, I do not save him, but I do let him die. It is tempting to say the difference between action and inaction is the difference between moving one's body and not moving one's body; but that does not help. When we allow something to happen, we are typically moving our bodies in all sorts of ways. If I allow you to die by running away, I may be moving my body very rapidly.



From here, we'll look at some less generic aff options.

One interesting literature base the aff might want to explore is [role ethics](#), or [Confucianism](#). This ethical tradition holds that morality is determined by one's standpoint in relation to others—particularly family and community. Within this system, one may have different moral obligations to different others. For example, you might be an elder to your younger siblings, and therefore have an obligation to be a role model and leader to them. However, your parents are your elders, so your responsibility to them is more about deference. Thus, the moral response in any particular situation is contingent upon your relationships with the other people involved.

Using role ethics, the aff would argue that inaction in the face of an injustice performed on a person to whom one has moral responsibility does make one morally culpable. For example, if my brother is extremely poor and his family is starving, failing to provide them with help would make me morally culpable for their suffering. However, I cannot be held morally responsible for all of the starvation in the world, because that is outside of both my capabilities and my [filial duty](#).

This argument would be strongest combined with an observation justifying why asking affs to defend individual culpability against every single injustice worldwide is an unfair burden, as discussed above.



With this kind of case, you can use a value/criterion structure of morality, defined according to the Confucian system of ethics. Your argument would be that moral culpability *does* exist, but *only* for those others to whom you owe some kind of allegiance (it does not have to strictly be only family, but family is a major part). Moreover, the exact nature of the obligation can change based on who you are, relative to the person experiencing the injustice. You could further argue that this is the only structure of morality and obligation to the other that is workable, because it acknowledges the impossibility of one individual helping everyone everywhere simultaneously, but still establishes a strict code of morality towards those whom one is close to and capable of actually affecting.

If you are going to use Confucianism, however, be aware that it traditionally prescribes roles women that are [not exactly progressive](#) by most current Western standards. You might see a feminism kritik in response.

Another strong option for the aff comes from [Immanuel Levinas](#), whose idea of “infinite responsibility to the other” seems to speak directly to this topic. For Levinas, ethics resides entirely within our relationship to the other. This responsibility is absolute and limitless. The argument rests on Levinas’s conviction that, prior to any other encounter with knowledge, or morality, or even the self, human beings are constituted by our encounters with other people. Therefore, it is not possible to accurately say that some situation “doesn’t concern you.” The unescapable nature of the human experience is that



every encounter with the other *does concern you*. Even in cases of hostile relationships and war, the circumstances of the other remain your responsibility. For Levinas, this means that the foundation of ethics is embracing an “infinite responsibility for the other.”

Here is **evidence**:

(Kajornpat Tangyin, professor of graduate philosophy & religion at Assumption University of Thailand, “Reading Levinas on Ethical Responsibility,” https://www.academia.edu/606687/Reading_Levinas_on_Ethical_Responsibility, 1/1/2008)

For Levinas, there can be no doubt that human relation begins at the encounter with the face; this face-to-face relation is the basis for all other discourse in society. He wants philosophy to begin with this relation, and this relation comes with an ethical demand, i.e., before the face of the other you shall not kill and in fact, you have to defend the life of the other. As you encounter another’s face, you cannot escape from this ethical command. It is inescapable. You cannot not respond to the face of the other whom you encounter, and this response always comes with your responsibility for the other. For Levinas, to be responsible is to be responsible for the other. Once in his interview, he says:

Q.: Concretely, how is the responsibility for the other translated?



E.L.: The other concerns me in all his material misery. It is a matter, eventually, of nourishing him, of clothing him. It is exactly the biblical assertion: Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, give shelter to the shelterless. The material side of man, the material life of the other, concerns me and, in the other, takes on for me an elevated signification and concerns my holiness. Recall in Matthew 25, Jesus' "You have hunted me, you have pursued me." "When have we hunted you, when have we pursued you?" the virtuous ask Jesus. Reply: when you "refused to feed the poor," when you hunted down the poor, when you were indifferent to him! As if, with regard to the other, I had responsibility starting from eating and drinking. And as if the other whom I hunted were equivalent to a hunted God. This holiness is perhaps but the holiness of a social problem. All the problems of eating and drinking, insofar as they concern the other, become sacred. (IB, 52)

Levinas here brings philosophy down from abstract ideas into a concrete experience concerned with the need of the other. At the moment I face the other, I cannot release myself from this ethical relation. I have to be responsible for the other at the level of basic material needs. In the act of facing the other, I cannot hide myself from the other. I cannot enjoy my life within myself alone because an act of facing here is an openness of the self to the other without return to the self. This concrete situation moves the I to be responsible for the other; the ethical relationship is prior to any system of moral thought. When Levinas mentions the teaching in the Gospel, Matthew 25, he reminds us about the way we treat the other is the way we treat God.



The infinite is revealed through the other. He always refers to the

Jewish proverb: “the other’s material needs are my spiritual needs.” Ethical relation, for him, begins with the response to the other’s material needs. To feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, give shelter to the shelterless, are my responsibilities. Holiness begins with practical morality, and practical morality is essentially based on ethical relation, and this relation cannot be abolished from human relationship. He says,

I have been speaking about that which stands behind practical morality; about the extraordinary relation between a man and his neighbour, a relation that continues to exist even when it is severely damaged. Of course we have the power to relate ourselves to the other as to an object, to oppress and exploit him; nevertheless the relation to the other, as a relation of responsibility, cannot be totally suppressed, even when it takes the form of politics or warfare. Here it is impossible to free myself by saying, ‘It’s not my concern.’ There is no choice, for it is always and inescapably my concern. (LR, 247)

Responsibility is usually understood in relation to the I and its actions. If I fail to do this job, I have to be responsible for this failure. If the other fails, responsibility belongs to the other and is not my concern. If the other does something wrong, she or he has to be responsible for that.

Responsibility belongs to the subject who acts willingly and intentionally. This form of responsibility is limited to the doer and someone who co-operates in this doing. We can calculate how far this responsibility extends, and how many persons are concerned. For Levinas,



however, responsibility is irreducible to any calculation and is not limited to any individual person. In his interview with Mortley, he says: "I cannot live in society on the basis of this one-to-one responsibility alone. There is not calculation in this responsibility: there is no pre-responsible knowledge" (Mortley, 1991, p.18). And elsewhere he observes: "To be me is always to have one more responsibility" (EN, 103).

Responsibility, for Levinas, is not conditioned by any knowledge. Instead, it happens at the moment we encounter the face of the other. This ethical responsibility is prior to any knowledge of the other; in other words: I have to be responsible for the other even though I do not know him or her. As Levinas puts it: "I understand responsibility as responsibility for the Other, thus as responsibility for what is not my deed, or for what does not even matter to me; or which precisely does matter to me, is met by me as face" (EI, 95). Before the other, we have no choice, and we cannot escape from our responsibility for the other. "To discover in the I such an orientation is to identify the I and morality. The I before another is infinitely responsible" (TTO, 353). If the other is beyond any limit and grasp, then responsibility is limitless. Levinas uses the term "infinite responsibility."



Here is more **evidence**, which connects this infinite responsibility with the meaning of life, as well as all other philosophical projects:

(Kajornpat Tangyin, professor of graduate philosophy & religion at Assumption University of Thailand, "Reading Levinas on Ethical Responsibility,"

https://www.academia.edu/606687/Reading_Levinas_on_Ethical_Responsibility, 1/1/2008)

The meaning of life is always hungry for the other at the level of basic need. The "I" cannot remain in itself in order to find the meaning of itself inwardly. The "I" has to leave the self for the other, the departure from the self to the other is to approach the neighbor, and this approach brings me to be responsible for the other, to substitute for the other. This ethical moment is the basis and prior to any philosophical discourse; this ethical responsibility for the other is, for Levinas, the essence of subjectivity. The meaning of the human person begins with this ethical moment. He says "Man has to be conceived on the basis of the self putting itself, despite itself, in place of everyone, substituted for everyone by its very non-interchangeability. He has to be conceived on the basis of the condition or uncondition of being hostage, hostage for all the others who, precisely qua others, do not belong to the same genus as I, since I am responsible even for their responsibility. It is by virtue of this supplementary responsibility that subjectivity is not the ego, but me." (CP, 150)



Affs who want to use Levinas can use infinite responsibility to the other as their criterion for morality—the above evidence supports this. Levinas’s insistence that infinite responsibility is a prerequisite for all other ethical or philosophical projects should come in very handy.

Keep in mind that Levinas does not exactly argue that inaction makes an individual morally culpable. Rather, a person *always already* has infinite responsibility. So, when reading this type of aff, you want to make sure to explain that failure to fulfill this responsibility creates culpability (as in guilt, or failure to do the right thing), but does not *create the responsibility* in the first place. Inaction cannot create moral responsibility, because the responsibility already existed. Inaction only creates the culpability (“wrongness”)—it “sours” the responsibility through its failure to relate ethically.

Levinas is a rather difficult writer, and you are strongly discouraged from reading his arguments if this paper is the only thing you have read. Instead, you will want to spend significant time with both his original primary texts and the secondary literature involved in interpreting and applying his ideas.



Another possible aff strategy uses the standard "[veil of ignorance](#)." The affirmative may argue that most individuals would hope for help if they were experiencing injustice, so, from the original position behind the veil, the conclusion is that inaction is immoral. This case, of course, would also need to win that this *would* actually be the consensus from the original position.

The last aff option we will cover today is **virtue ethics**. This ethical tradition goes all the way back to Plato and Aristotle, and has its root in Eastern philosophical traditions even older than that, so our discussion will be very brief. I do not need to reinvent the wheel on virtue ethics. There is lots of good material just one quick internet search away.

In short, virtue ethics says that, rather than basing morality on outcomes (utilitarianism), or universal moral laws (deontology), morality should instead be thought of as a characteristic an individual can possess. By "characteristic," I do not mean their habits, mannerisms, or even actions. Instead, virtue ethicists see it as something much deeper. For example, if I don't cheat on an exam because I fear I will get caught, that is *not* morally equivalent to cheating because I value honesty and integrity. In basic terms, virtue ethics tell us that the project of morality is not to *do the right things*, but to *be the right kind of person*.



This means an aff based on virtue ethics would suggest that failure to respond to injustice makes one morally culpable even if nothing very bad happens, because morality is rooted in the individual. If you chose to ignore another in need of help, you have failed to seek justice, charity, and other important virtues. Therefore, you are morally culpable—not for the original unjust event, but for your own failure to be a virtuous person.

Here is a final piece of aff **evidence**, which—while not specifically speaking of value ethics—describes the importance of compassion, attentiveness, and respect for others. According to this card, it is hypocritical to claim to be a good person and ignore the suffering of others. It also suggests care for the other is necessary to affirm human dignity and build good societies, so it could also work for (running or answering) utilitarian cases:

(Elisabeth Porter, Professor and head of the School of International Studies at the University of South Australia, "Can Politics Practice Compassion?" Hypatia 21.4 97-123, 2006)

First, attentiveness to suffering is needed because as fragile, vulnerable humans, we all suffer sometimes. The suffering I refer to here is that which has political implications. "How we engage with the suffering humanity around us affects and mirrors the health of our souls and the health of society" (Spelman 1997a, 12). Feeling compassion is a moral prompt to encourage a response



to those we know are suffering. Nussbaum suggests that compassion rests on three beliefs about the nature of suffering.²⁰ First, that the suffering is serious, not trivial. Second, "that the suffering was not caused primarily by the person's own culpable actions" (1996, 31).²¹ For example, suffering is caused by mercenaries or armies who murder all men in a village as "soft targets"; "smart bombs" that "surgically" destroy independent media networks and family homes; "friendly fire" that accidentally kills allies; and missiles on "probing missions" that kill civilians in war as "collateral damage." The Australian government's mandatory policy of detaining asylum seekers causes suffering. Third, "the pitier's own possibilities are similar to those of the sufferer" (31). Compassion acknowledges vulnerability, an admittance of one's own weakness, without which arrogant harshness prevails. For this reason, those who have suffered great hardship, pain, or loss are often are the most compassionate. Yet, we do not wish suffering on anyone simply to teach what is required for compassion. Cornelio Sommaruga, who headed the International Committee of the Red Cross for ten years, has reflected that it was his "daily realization that the more one is confronted with the suffering caused by war, the less one becomes accustomed to it" (1998, ix). Just as Weil used the term "discernment" (quoted in R. Bell 1998), Nussbaum suggests that "judgment" that does not utilize the "intelligence of compassion in coming to grips with the significance of human suffering is blind and incomplete" (1996, 49). This judgment is crucial for understanding the conditions that give rise to injury and thus to the wise responses that might address such harms. When the experience of, for



example, being in a detention camp in a remote desert area seems to crush the morale of asylum seekers, attentiveness to their plight in the form of gifts, letters, and practical or legal help affirms their humanity. We see this dignity explained in Seyla Benhabib's concept of the "generalized other," which treats people as having equal rights and duties including the right to seek asylum when one has been persecuted, and the "concrete other," which "requires us to view each and every rational being as an individual with a concrete history, identity, and affective-emotional constitution" (1987, 164). Ethical politics is about trying to cultivate decent polities that affirms human dignity. Such politics acknowledges the uniqueness of citizens, and affirms "our humanity in making others part of our lives while recognizing their right to be different" (Coicaud and Warner 2001, 13). It is [End Page 112] by no means simple to humanize the experience of the other when that experience is horrific, such as in torture, war-rape, sexual trafficking, or existing in detention camps. The "humanizing" comes in recognizing the intensity of pain, feeling some of the anguish, and realizing human vulnerability to the point of appreciating that in different situations, we too might be tortured, raped, forced into prostitution, or seeking asylum. Yet there are competing interpretations of the nature of pain and its causes, consequences, and moral, religious, and social significance. Debating pain and suffering places it in a political space. A compassionate society that values people must value different people with different interpretations of what is needed to ease suffering. It is hypocritical for states to mouth the rhetoric of compassion and respect of obligations to others,



but in practice to ignore suffering. For example, mandatory detention of asylum seekers in Australia can last for many years.²² Isolation, uncertainty, separation from families, and memories of past traumas in one's country of origin often lead to mental breakdown or prolonged anguish. Yet the Australian government claims to respect the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. I have explained what constitutes suffering and that attentiveness affirms dignity. I clarify further the nature of attentiveness. If morality is about our concerned responsiveness, attention is the prerequisite to intense regard. Iris Murdoch borrowed the concept of "attention" from Simone Weil "to express the idea of a just and loving gaze" (1985, 34) on the reality of particular persons. Part of the moral task is, as Murdoch reiterated, to see the world in its reality—to see people struggling in pain and despair. Weil, too, gave "attention" a prominent place, grounded in concrete matters of exploitation, economic injustice, and oppression.²³ Her emphases were pragmatic in struggling against the debilitating nature of life—how "it humiliates, crushes, politicizes, demoralizes, and generally destroys the human spirit" (quoted in R. Bell 1998, 16)—and idealistic in striving to put ideals into practice. Too readily, we think about suffering in the height of media accounts of famine, suicide bombings, terrorist attacks, refugee camps, and war's destructive impact, and retreat quickly into our small world of self-pity. As Margaret Little explains, Murdoch's point was that "the seeing itself is a task—the task of being attentive to one's surroundings" (1995, 121). We need to "see" reality in order to imagine what it might be



like for others, even when this includes horrific images from war violence.²⁴ Yet despite the presence of embedded journalists, media reporting of such events as the invasion of Iraq has remained entirely typical in that "the experience of the people on the receiving end of this violence remains closed to us" (Manderson 2003, 4). Without political imagination, we will not have compassionate nations. "Without being tragic spectators, we will not have the insight required if we are to make life somewhat less tragic for those who . . . are hungry, and oppressed, and in pain" (Nussbaum 1996, 88). In order for political leaders to demonstrate [End Page 113] compassion, they should display the ability to imagine the lives led by members of the diverse groups that they themselves lead. Otherwise, dispassionate detachment predominates and acts like the 2003 invasion of Iraq lead to talk of freedom without seeing fear, assume liberation without replacing the losses, and abuse power without addressing people's pain. "The difference, for instance, between someone who discerns the painfulness of torture and someone who sees the evil of it is that the latter person has come to see the painfulness as a reason not to torture" (Little 1995, 126). Attentive ethics in international relations is about priorities and choices.

Next, we will move on to the **negative** side of the debate.



Neg strategies

One approach for the neg would be to develop a simple **utilitarianism**-based case, which argues that individuals acting may make the situation worse. For example, if I see someone having a heart attack, and I attempt to conduct emergency surgery on them despite having no medical training whatsoever, I will assuredly make things worse, not better. Similarly, it is possible to make the case that certain kinds of foreign intervention, while motivated by good intentions (such as overthrowing an abusive, tyrannical government), can actually wind up creating a spiral of unforeseen consequences that leaves the world worse off overall. In these sorts of cases, the neg will argue, it is actually morally correct to abide by inaction, even if one's emotions are driving them to try to help. From a utilitarian perspective, this proves that inaction is sometimes the morally superior choice.

Another option for utilitarian negs is to argue that individual action against injustice trades off with broader social/governmental change. Instead of putting the fight against injustice on the backs of individuals, you can argue, we should be working on governments, social institutions, etc. The argument here is basically that doing individual good deeds makes one feel "like a good person" and reduces the energy and desire to go fight for large-scale change. This argument would be strongest in cases dealing with systemic social justice issues.



Here is **evidence**:

(BBC Ethics Guide, "What's wrong with charity," http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/charity/against_1.shtml, 2011)

This isn't a new argument: "It is more socially injurious for the millionaire to spend his surplus wealth in charity than in luxury. For by spending it on luxury, he chiefly injures himself and his immediate circle, but by spending it in charity he inflicts a graver injury upon society. For every act of charity, applied to heal suffering arising from defective arrangements of society, serves to weaken the personal springs of social reform, alike by the 'miraculous' relief it brings to the individual 'case' that is relieved, and by the softening influence it exercises on the hearts and heads of those who witness it. It substitutes the idea and the desire of individual reform for those of social reform, and so weakens the capacity for collective self-help in society," (J A Hobson, *Work and Wealth*, 1914).

Slavoj Zizek has also written extensively on this idea. He takes it one step further by suggesting that not only does individual charitability diminish our resolve to seek change, it actually serves to prop up existing injustices. Keep in mind, should you decide to use Zizek to make this type of argument, that he



is a critic of capitalism, so you will need to be prepared to win that capitalism is bad. If that type of strategy doesn't appeal to you, you'd be best off using a different author.

Here is some **evidence** on Zizek:

(R.C. Smith, director and executive editor of Heathwood Press and philosophy/Frankfurt School critical theory researcher, "REVIEW OF SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK'S FIRST AS TRAGEDY, THEN AS FARCE (ON CONSUMER ETHICS AND THE ROLE OF CHARITY IN CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM)," Heathwood Press, <http://www.heathwoodpress.com/slavoj-zizek-first-as-tragedy-then-as-farce/>, 4/13/2012)

As I have claimed elsewhere, the usefulness of charity or a consumerist ethics in capitalist society is evident. Principally speaking, it serves as a distraction – it takes away from the fundamental issues of ailing society that originally give rise to disgusting social inequalities and buries them with a false ethics justified solely in the name of capitalist ideology.

In a social reality where malady and social injustice is so deeply embedded in the structural context of its economic/political enterprise, there is no one act of charity that is justified unless it fundamentally challenges the very social structure in which malady



and injustice originate. Thus, we reach the difficult question of charity which has more to do with a sense of consumerist redemption than actual, foundational transformation.

One problem with charity, especially as it looks to pick up where capitalism fails, is that the very phenomenon of charity itself – however positive it might be in terms of human motivation – more often than not becomes twisted into an ideologically affirming means which indirectly perpetuates the very “bad social context” (Adorno) of contemporary society. This is, if anything, significant of the power of global capitalism and not necessarily a lame humanity. Our historic era is often described as one of volunteerism and generosity, and with good reason. It is readily noticeable that there is a significant awareness amongst a great number of people with regards to the dire situation and needless suffering of others, of an increasing need for an environmental ethics, and so on. But like many things the awareness of another in need – the very social operation of charity, even – becomes a cover for the systemic failures of the system of capital (as Žižek reflects, it is limited to a mode of charity on behalf of private property which is essentially immoral) . It is for this reason that, in a similar vein to Adorno, Žižek correctly argues that global capitalism (as a social totality) “defines the rules and bounds of society” and leaves the individual and community to function to the best of their abilities within that ideological conception of life. This includes the



distortion of such deep and foundational issues as ethics and morality, let alone how we perceive the problems behind social deprivation, inequality and needless suffering.

Another problem is that while charity is a caring and life affirming effort by the individual, the very phenomenon of charity itself is principally symptomatic of, on the one hand, the increasingly desperate nature of our bad social context and, on the other hand, the inherently corrosive circumstance of global capitalism which defines the laws and boundaries of the very situation that requires charity in the first place. To a great extent the very need for social charity is a symptom of the bad social context of our contemporary social reality. As so many people have pointed out and continue to point out, increasing poverty and economic disparity are necessary symptoms under the global capitalist model. As a result, an increase in charitable donations is a noble act by the individual; but it is also one that directly and indirectly submits to the corrosive social reality that gave rise to the unmet needs of another in the first place.

Going in the exact opposite direction, yet another possible neg argument comes from the **objectivist and/or libertarian** schools of thought. This is a straight-forward negation—you can argue that there is no inherent ethical responsibility to any other person. Rather, it is morally justified to pursue one's own rational self-interest. A person might *choose* to act against injustice, if he or she wants to for any reason,



but there is no *moral obligation* to do so. Indeed, the objectivists would argue, what would be truly immoral is to compel someone to do something that may be against his/her interests!

Here is **evidence**:

(William R. Thomas, lecturer in economics at the University at Albany, "What is the Objectivist Position in Morality (Ethics)?", The Atlas Society, <http://atlassociety.org/objectivism/atlas-university/what-is-objectivism/objectivism-101-blog/3369-what-is-the-objectivist-position-in-morality-ethics>, 6/15/2010)

For thousands of years, people have been taught that goodness consists in serving others. "Love your brother as yourself" teach the Christian scriptures. "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need" preach the Marxists. Even the liberal Utilitarian philosophers, many of whom defended free market capitalism, taught that one should act always to attain "the greatest good for the greatest number." The result of this code has been a bloody trail of wars and revolutions to enforce self-sacrifice, and an endless struggle in society to achieve equality among people.

Meanwhile, like the barnyard revolutionaries of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the advocates of uniformity and self-sacrifice strain to prove themselves "more equal than others," so



that they may determine how much love is enough, or what your ability is and what your needs should be. It seems loving our fellow man is a fine way to hate him.

The Objectivist ethics rebuilds morality from the ground up. "You cannot say 'I love you' if you cannot say the 'I,'" wrote Ayn Rand . According to Objectivism , a person's own life and happiness is the ultimate good. To achieve happiness requires a morality of rational selfishness, one that does not give undeserved rewards to others and that does not ask them for oneself.

Traditional moral codes have taught that social life is a war of dog-eat-dog and that people must restrain themselves through self-sacrifice and self-abnegation. "Live simply, that others may simply live," is their slogan. It is a doctrine suited to a world of peasant villages and rapacious conquerors.

Another negative option draws on **Immanuel Kant**. The [first formulation](#) of his categorical imperative states that a moral proposition must be universal and free from any particular conditions. Another way of stating that is that something is only moral if it would make a good universal law. Therefore, if it is possible to come up with situations in which inaction would be desirable, then the resolution must be false. Obviously, if you plan to win on this argument, you will also need to clearly win that action against injustice is not always good.



Here is some **evidence**:

(Garth Kemerling, PhD in modern philosophy & ethics, "Kant: the moral order," online philosophical dictionary, <http://www.philosophypages.com/hy/5i.htm>, last modified 12/11/2011)

Constrained only by the principle of universalizability, the practical reason of any rational being understands the categorical imperative to be: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." That is, each individual agent regards itself as determining, by its decision to act in a certain way, that everyone (including itself) will always act according to the same general rule in the future. This expression of the moral law, Kant maintained, provides a concrete, practical method for evaluating particular human actions of several distinct varieties.



Here is another piece of **evidence** that says that inaction is morally justified when there are no good, viable options available:

(Daniel Statman, research fellow at Shalom Hartman Institute, "Moral Tragedies, Supreme Emergencies and National-Defence," Journal of Applied Philosophy, Vol. 23 No. 3, <http://lecturers.haifa.ac.il/he/hcc/dstatman/Documents/E28.pdf> , 2006)

Supreme emergencies, I believe, are not instances of genuine paradox. They are, rather, cases of moral tragedy. A moral tragedy occurs when, all things considered, every viable option one is confronted with involves a serious moral violation. In a supreme emergency, this is clear: if one violates jus in bello, one commits murder and perhaps other crimes. On the other hand, if one does not violate jus in bello, one's omissions may contribute causally to the death and devastation of one's people at the hands of a brutal, rights-violating aggressor. 7 Perceiving supreme emergencies as cases of moral tragedy implies that, in such cases, one faces a 'moral blind alley' (ibid.), with nowhere to turn, and no way to stay morally clean. But precisely because the alley is blind, i.e. all options are morally unacceptable, one cannot be blamed for choosing one option (committing murder or other crimes) over the other (negatively contributing to the death of one's own people and the devastation of one's own land), because such choice does not amount to neglecting the right course of action. The Tragedy Solution, then, offers the following argument: (1) In moral tragedies, the agent cannot be blamed for any course of action



she chooses, because no respectable course of action is available; (2) Supreme emergencies are cases of moral tragedy; (3) Hence, in supreme emergencies, the political and military agents cannot be blamed for killing the innocent, or for committing other problematic actions against the enemy (given that such actions are necessary for victory). On Orend's view, then, Walzer might have been right in assuming that Churchill's bombing of German cities was immune to moral reproach, but for reasons different to those he mentioned. The immunity is not the result of some kind of utilitarian calculus, but an implication from the tragic nature of the situation. In reconstructing Orend's argument, I have ascribed to him the view that killing the innocent in supreme emergencies is permissible.

On the other hand, negatives may also want to use **metaethics**. If there is no such thing as universal morality, and ethics are always determined relatively, then the resolution must be false. We cannot say *resolutely* (as in "resolved") that inaction makes someone morally culpable, because that depends entirely on their own personal code. Even if that individual is violating his/her own system of ethics by failing to act, that still does not prove the resolution true universally.



Here is a piece of **evidence** that argues that morality is contextual and not universal:

(Ana Iltis, Director of the Center for Bioethics, Health and Society and Professor of Philosophy at Wake Forest University, "Understanding Moral Obligation in the Face of Moral Pluralism," Journal of Value Inquiry, vol 37 issue 4, pp 471-479, 12/2003)

The multiplicity of autonomous selves do not sustain a single standard of morality. MacIntyre argues that we possess "the fragments of a conceptual scheme....We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have – very largely if not entirely – lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality." The most striking feature of contemporary moral debates is "that they apparently can find no terminus. There seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture," The ongoing debate concerning the morality of immorality of abortion is a clear example of this lack of agreement or spectrum of views. There are significant disputes concerning the moral and legal permissibility of abortion. A successful account of moral integrity and moral responsibility, therefore, cannot be universal but must be situated in a particular context. Absent a universal understanding of morality, no single sense of moral obligation is available. There appears to be no framework within which we may justifiably assert that all individuals are morally obligated in particular ways beyond a limited set of side constraints we may recognize as universal. It nevertheless is the case that we routinely wish to attribute moral obligations to individuals and to understand



the moral obligations particular persons bear. We may understand particular individuals as having particular obligations only with an appreciation of their moral characters and moral integrity. Moral character allows us to attribute moral obligations, and moral integrity is the mechanism by which we can evaluate the extent to which they satisfy the obligations.

Similarly, **Friedrich Nietzsche** and his contemporaries argue that attempting to eradicate suffering and injustice from the world is a pointless and destructive endeavor. Not only is misfortune and suffering an inevitable part of human existence, most of history's worst atrocities have been justified as an attempt to finally save us from suffering/injustice/whatever (for example, the Holocaust was called "the final solution"). What's more, this constant drive to eliminate the "bad" renders us full of resentment ("*ressentiment*" in the literature) and unable to truly appreciate life. Instead, we should accept the world as it is. Only then can we find satisfaction in existence.

Now, contrary to a common misunderstanding among debaters, a position based on Nietzsche would not require the neg to say that suffering is always good, that injustice doesn't matter at all, or that an individual should never take any actions that help someone else. Rather, the argument is that we shouldn't create a *metaphysical duty* to do so.



Here's some **evidence**:

(Aydan Turanli, Professor of Humanities and Social Sciences at Istanbul Technical University, "Nietzsche and the Later Wittgenstein: An Offense to the Quest for Another World," The Journal of Nietzsche Studies 26 pp 55-63, 2003)

The craving for absolutely general specifications results in doing metaphysics. Unlike Wittgenstein, Nietzsche provides an account of how this craving arises. The creation of the two worlds such as apparent and real world, conditioned and unconditioned world, being and becoming is the creation of the resentment of metaphysicians. Nietzsche says, "to imagine another, more valuable world is an expression of hatred for a world that makes one suffer: the resentment of metaphysicians against actuality is here creative" (WP III 579). Escaping from this world because there is grief in it results in asceticism. Paying respect to the ascetic ideal is longing for the world that is pure and denaturalized. Craving for frictionless surfaces, for a transcendental, pure, true, ideal, perfect world, is the result of the resentment of metaphysicians who suffer in this world. Metaphysicians do not affirm this world as it is, and this paves the way for many explanatory theories in philosophy. In criticizing a philosopher who pays homage to the ascetic ideal, Nietzsche says, "he wants to escape from torture" (GM III 6). The traditional philosopher or the ascetic priest continues to repeat, "My kingdom is not of this world" (GM III 10). This is a longing for another world in which one does not suffer. It is to



escape from this world; to create another illusory, fictitious, false world. This longing for "the truth" of a world in which one does not suffer is the desire for a world of constancy. It is supposed that contradiction, change, and deception are the causes of suffering; in other words, the senses deceive; it is from the senses that all misfortunes come; reason corrects the errors; therefore reason is the road to the constant. In sum, this world is an error; the world as it ought to be exists. This will to truth, this quest for another world, this desire for the world as it ought to be, is the result of unproductive thinking. It is unproductive because it is the result of avoiding the creation of the world as it ought to be. According to Nietzsche, the will to truth is "the impotence of the will to create" (WP III 585). Metaphysicians end up with the creation of the "true" world in contrast to the actual, changeable, deceptive, self-contradictory world. They try to discover the true, transcendental world that is already there rather than creating a world for themselves. For Nietzsche, on the other hand, the transcendental world is the "denaturalized world" (WP III 586). The way out of the circle created by the resentment of metaphysicians is the will to life rather than the will to truth. The will to truth can be overcome only through a Dionysian relationship to existence. This is the way to a new philosophy, which in Wittgenstein's terms aims "to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle"



Remember, Nietzsche and his related scholars offer complex ideas and a tremendous amount of relevant readings. If you plan to pursue this strategy, you will need to plan to dedicate a significant amount of time with the primary texts.

That covers the basics of the Nationals 2015 topic. However, don't forget that this guide does not cover every possible argument. This topic is extremely broad and will allow for a diverse array of approaches. You should continue to do your own research and prepare for all possibilities.

Don't forget to thank Debate Central when you're on stage accepting your National Championship! ;)

You can also always submit completed cases to rachel.stevens@ncpa.org for a confidential, personalized critique. Questions about this guide, the resolution, or debate in general? Don't hesitate to email!

One last thing: come see me at the Debate Central booth in the expo area at the National tournament! I'll be handing out all kinds of free Debate Central goodies for you to snag.

Good luck!