In this week’s reading assignment the issue of whether there is a significant moral difference between killing and letting die was considered. In particular, a thought experiment was presented that was intended to test whether the distinction between the two is important or not. Here is how it was presented in the text:

Uncle Smith and Maurice

Smith stands to gain a large inheritance if anything should happen to his six-year-old nephew Maurice. One evening while Maurice is taking his bath, Smith sneaks into the bathroom and drowns the child, then arranges things so that it will look like an accident.

Uncle Jones and Martin

Jones also stands to gain if anything should happen to his six-year-old nephew Martin. Like Smith, Jones sneaks in planning to drown the child in his bath. However, just as he enters the bathroom Jones sees Martin slip and hit his head, falling face down in the water and beginning to drown. Jones is delighted; he stands by, ready to push the child's head back under if it is necessary, but it is not necessary. With only a little thrashing about, Martin drowns all by himself, "accidentally," as Jones watches and does nothing.

The key to using this thought experiment as a way to get clear on whether there is a genuine difference is to ask the following question: is there ANY moral difference between Smith’s action and Jones’s action? Jones will claim that he didn’t kill Martin, whereas Smith killed Maurice, and that means that Jones isn’t QUITE as morally bad as Smith. But is this true?

Please answer these questions: 1. Is there a moral difference between what Smith did and what Jones did? 2. Is Jones in any way a morally better person than Smith, based solely on what we know from these scenarios?

I don’t believe there is a moral difference between what Smith and Jones did, since the nephew drowned in both instances. The difference is that Smith caused his nephew to drown and Jones allowed his nephew to die without causing it. In both instances the nephew died, and both ended with the same result despite Smith and Jones doing different things. I believe that Jones is not a morally better person than Smith, since he stood there and watched his nephew drown while he could’ve helped, which makes it equivalent to murder.