



Taking A Side

By **John Shand**

August 15, 2025 - 8 minutes read - 1646 words

It is sometimes said in a conflict or fight between people that, ‘Sometimes one has to take a side’. To emphasise the imperative, ‘just’ is added, and we have, ‘Sometimes one just has to take a side’. This may apply to individuals, nations, institutions, and the like. But why? We are surely looking for something more than an arbitrary choice equivalent to tossing a coin. For one thing we are suggesting that it is an active choice, and that choosing one side has some justification.

The motive for taking a side may be thought of as serving one’s own intellectual integrity and honesty, regardless of whether doing so has any consequences. To some people that may not matter – but that is another subject.

Sometimes of course there is no difficulty in taking a side. Where one side is clearly in the wrong and started whatever they are doing and causing harm,

perhaps aggressively, showing no sight of stopping let alone having contrition or feeling remorse, the other side blameless, then there may be little problem in choosing a side.

The motive for taking a side may be thought of as serving one's own intellectual integrity and honesty, regardless of whether doing so has any consequences.




The interesting question is why when the choosing of a side is not clear, weighing up morally and practically both sides, it may be claimed that one still has to take or pick a side, and do so with some idea of it being a normative moral imperative.

To understand better the reason that such a moral imperative to choose a side might exist better one has to look to the difference between what gets called 'sins of commission' and 'sins of omission'. The use of the word 'sin' here is just an idiom, and although it once had a religious connotation, it need not do so, and usually does not, only meaning something morally wrong, a moral mistake of a certain sort. It is fair to say that in our thinking, positive acts, those of commission, are more vivid and rank higher in judging them morally than negative acts, those of omission, where we do nothing. This is probably owing to doing something rather than doing nothing being more easily construed as deliberate, and therefore more culpable, as well as a psychological byproduct of it being harder to identify what doing nothing consists in as opposed to doing something. There may be some grounds for that, but that does not entail that some omissions, not acting, cannot be morally grievous. It may be the case that we would look most severely on someone who pours petrol through the letter box of a house and sets fire to it, leading to the death of a child. That however does not mean that it would not also be considered a grave and culpable moral matter by omission not to wade into a pool as we walk by it, to save a drowning toddler.

Carrying this over to taking a side, we may say that people often find it easier

and somehow less morally wrong to sit on the fence between two sides in conflict, than to choose a side and risk getting it wrong. This is particularly true when the rights and wrongs of a conflict are not clear, or are perceived by someone to be not clear. But this ignores the commission and omission distinction. That one might choose the wrong side morally speaking in a conflict does not mean that not choosing either side is devoid of moral censure, such that it too could be morally right or wrong. Choosing to do nothing is not to not act, it is rather the act of choosing not to act. So choosing not to pick a side is itself an act and may not in certain circumstances be embraced comfortably as a purely negative non-decision for which no moral evaluation would be applicable. Not choosing a side is not the same as being oblivious to there being sides, one of which one might take, or yet choose not to take. Though in fact being oblivious to there being sides at all could also be regarded in certain circumstances as morally culpable. It might be said that it is a moral fault to be oblivious to the conflict engulfing the sides and that one should have been aware of it. But that is a matter for another essay.

Choosing to do nothing is not to not act, it is rather the act of choosing not to act. 

Let us say we have two sides in a conflict, A and B. We are aware of the conflict. What are the possibilities in our attitude to the conflict?

- (a) One side is clearly in the right, say A, so we choose side A, and by that support what A is doing.
- (b) The right and wrong between the two sides A and B is more evenly matched, so we decide not to choose either side, and endeavour to act as an even-minded moral broker in order to resolve the conflict.
- (c) It is not clear which of the two sides A or B is in the right or wrong, but we decide to choose and support side A.

It is (c) that is somewhat mysterious here. Why should we choose A or B when we are unclear or disputable who is in the right or the wrong? 'Sometimes you just have to take a side'.

Part of the answer, although not the main one presented here, is one of the greater context. It may be the case that the conflict between A and B has implications outside the conflict itself. For example, if we choose A and not B, it may be the case that B will be more likely than A to start a war again and somewhere else. So despite the unclarity of the immediate conflict, B is more potentially dangerous than A. We might see this between two individuals in conflict, so we choose A and support them because we are convinced that B has done more harm in the past and is more likely to do harm in the future beyond the present nature of the conflict between A and B.

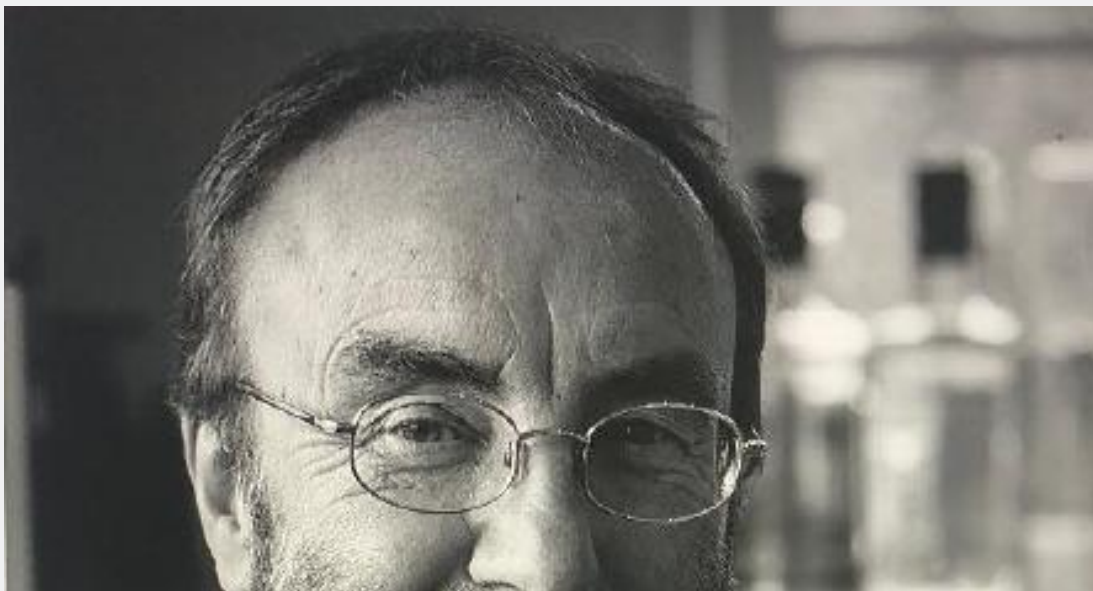
The main answer is the unlikeness of equality. The central answer proposed here as to why it makes sense to say that sometimes one just has to choose to take a side even when it is unclear which is in the right or wrong is that it is very unlikely that the right and wrong is equal on both sides.

Apply this to A and B. It is not a matter of equality of power. A strong man is not inherently in the wrong just because he is stronger if he uses force rightly against a weaker man. What is at issue here is a lack of equality of moral right. Given that, if one does not choose a side, but sits on the fence doing nothing, one will risk, supporting the side in the wrong by the sin of omission of not choosing a side. It might be said that in case of unclarity the same applies to choosing a side. This is true. But there is no point in pretending that the choosing is a morally judgeable act, but the not choosing is not a morally judgeable act simply because we decided not to choose, for one can equally get it wrong. Not choosing a side is to choose a side where the two sides are morally unequal, as is almost certain, because, by omission one is not choosing (advocating) the right side and by omission one is not not choosing (rejecting) the wrong side. The facts, as it were, will decide for you although you omit to choose. Not getting involved, as it is sometimes put, is to get involved as by default as one will, because of a lack of equality of right, be aiding the side in the wrong against the side in the right.

In not taking a side, because of the unlikeness of the equality of moral right, one will by default and tacitly be supporting the wrong side. 🐦

In not taking a side, because of the unlikeness of the equality of moral right, one will by default and tacitly be supporting the wrong side. In addition, by not taking a side one will be supporting the wrong side morally by omission of not supporting the right side. And there will be a right and wrong side almost certainly because of the lack of equality of right. In not taking or choosing a side one is almost bound to end up choosing the wrong side by not judging which side is wrong and which right, for one of them almost certainly is.

Be part of the discussion! [Click here](#) to leave a comment.





[Dr John Shand](#) is a Visiting Fellow in Philosophy at the Open University. He studied philosophy at the University of Manchester and King's College, University of Cambridge. He has taught at Cambridge, Manchester and the Open University. The author of numerous articles, reviews, and edited books, his own books include, *Arguing Well* (London: Routledge, 2000) and *Philosophy and Philosophers: An Introduction to Western Philosophy*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2014).

Contact information:

- Dr John Shand, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire, MK7 6AA, United Kingdom.
- <https://open.academia.edu/JohnShand>
- <http://fass.open.ac.uk/philosophy/people>

John Shand on Daily Philosophy:

- [A Very Short Philosophical Dictionary.](#)
- [How Humour Works.](#)
- [Assisted Voluntary Euthanasia. The main arguments](#)
- [The Knowledge-Effect. Is more knowledge always better?](#)
- [Kant's Joke: Are Practical Jokes Wrong?](#)
- [Kant's Categories and the Stevenson Screen.](#)
- [Reasons and Causes. We are not as rational as we think we are](#)
- [The Wind on Your Face. A reflection](#)
- [What Are We Responsible For? Intentions, consequences and character](#)
- [Taking A Side.](#)

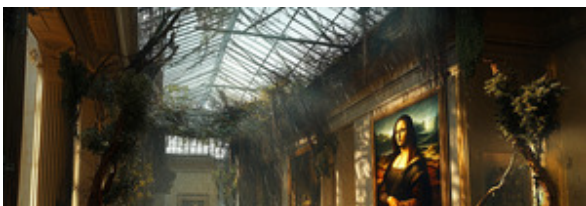


Related



Moral Statements and Truth

March 22, 2025



Human Extinction

December 7, 2024



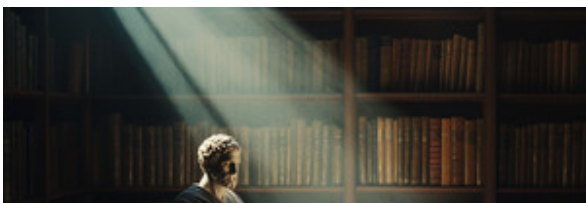
In Praise of Misinformation

October 12, 2024



Fat Acceptance and Vaccine Rejectionism

March 8, 2025



An Impediment to the Body... Not the Will

February 21, 2025





Reasons and Causes

March 1, 2024

Current affairs	Guest post	Modern life	BestOf
-----------------	------------	-------------	--------





Your ad-blocker ate the form? Just click [here](#) to subscribe!

Cite this article: Shand, J.. (2025, August 15). Taking A Side. *Daily Philosophy*. <http://localhost:1313/john-shand-taking-a-side/>

Current affairs



John Shand
Taking A Side



Sabahat Fida
Bridging Kant and Hijab
From modesty to moral autonomy



John Shand
Moral Statements and Truth



Rony Guldmann
Fat Acceptance and Vaccine
Rejectionism

Guides

2. ACT SO THAT EVERYONE COULD ACT IN THE SAME WAY AS YOU.



Andreas Matthias

New Video Series: Western Ethics Theories

The Shortest Possible Overview



Andreas Matthias

Western Ethics Theories

The Shortest Possible Overview



The Ultimate Guide to the Philosophy of Erich Fromm

Biography, ideas, books



The Ultimate Guide to Epicurus

Biography, ideas, books



Epicurus: A Guide to the Principal Doctrines

Text, commentary and study guide

Podcast Episodes [\[all\]](#)

[101. Descartes First Meditation -- Livestream](#)

[100. Descartes Discourse on the Method and Meditations \(Livestream\) - Part 2](#)

[099. Descartes: I think therefore I am \(Livestream\) - Discourse on the Method Part 1](#)

[098. Plato's Symposium - Part 3 \(Livestream\)](#)

[097. Plato's Symposium - Part 2 \(Livestream\)](#)

[\[All Episodes\]](#)

Top comments

LAST COMMENTS

BEST COMMENTS

MOST COMMENTED ARTICLES

No comments

Find us on:



Podcast: **Feed** **Accented Philosophy Podcast**