

Convenient Abstractions

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Abstract

Brief remark on a common sophism.

Any ethical analysis of a situation begins with an abstraction, which intends to throw its morally salient edges into relief. The choice of the degree and, more importantly, the axis of abstraction is undertaken prior to any explicit framing of the problem. But by the time these operations are performed, and the space of meaningful solutions is cast, only the most superficial dilemmas remain.

Since these operations do not, in general, benefit from the clear light of an explicit moral framing (they're responsible, after all, for constructing that framing) they tend to be guided by less deliberate choices. A particularly common outcome is that, before the explicit moral question has even been phrased, the situation has been abstracted in such a way, and to such a degree, that its especially uncomfortable aspects have vanished. Just as we do for the camera, we illuminate the situation so that its shadows are flattering.

Why break a sweat defending a concrete and grisly hate-group, for instance, when you can defend its shadow, "the outgroup", instead?