

Renarrating the False Dichotomy
Between “Thoughts and Prayers” and Action
in the Aftermath of Tragedy

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“My thoughts and prayers”....Do you know what that’s worth? F** nothing. F**** less than nothing. Less than nothing.**

-Anthony Jeselnik, *Thoughts and Prayers*, 2015¹

...Paris, 130. Bamako Hotel, 20. San Bernardino, 14. Wilkinsburg, 6. Orlando nightclub, 49. Dallas, 5. Baton Rouge, 3. Mukilteo, 3. Citronelle, 6. Burlington, 5. Broward County, 5. Orlando, 5. Alexandria. San Francisco, 3. Plano, 8. Las Vegas, 58. Sutherland Springs church, 26. Benton, 2. Melcroft, 4. Parkland, 17. Santa Fe High School, 10. Cincinnati, 3. Pittsburgh synagogue, 11. Thousand Oaks, 12. Chicago, 3. Campinas Cathedral, 4. Sebring, 5. Ascension and Livingston Parish, 5. Aurora, Illinois, 5. Christchurch mosques, 51. Sri Lanka, at least 250. Poway, 1. Charlotte, 2. Highlands Ranch, 1. Virginia Beach, 12. Gilroy, 3. El Paso, 22. Dayton, 9. Midland-Odessa, 7. Orinda, 5. Santa Clarita, 2. Fresno, 4. Miramar, 3. Pensacola, 3. Jersey City, 5. Fort Worth, 2...

Innocent lives unjustly taken or devastated. Individual lives grouped into these nameless numbers—unceremoniously submerged in headlines summarizing appalling acts of evil that caused untimely deaths and horrific physical and emotional pain, headlines which in thus obscuring each victim only inflict more suffering upon them.² Thousands more wounded, and countless other lives forcibly and irrevocably altered for the worse.

Many more mass shootings occurred both before and in between—and tragically will, no doubt, occur after as well—those mentioned in this list, but the horrific atrocities here listed

¹ Anthony Jeselnik, *Thoughts and Prayers*, Netflix film, directed by Adam Dubin (San Francisco: Stark Raving Black Productions, 2015).

nonetheless represent some of those that have tragically transpired since Anthony Jeselnik premiered his dark comedy routine *Thoughts and Prayers* on Netflix in October of 2015.

Referring to the typical response to tragedy and evil by those not directly experiencing or undergoing suffering, Jeselnik claims of thoughts and prayers:

This is who I'm making fun of when I make a joke on Twitter the day of a tragedy. The people who see something horrible happen in the world and they run to the Internet. And they run to their social media....And they all write down the exact same thing: "My thoughts and prayers."...Do you know what that's worth? F**** nothing. F**** less than nothing. You are not giving any of your time, your money, or even your compassion.³

The disputed validity of offering thoughts and prayers has remained a contentious centerpiece of public discourse dating back at least to the Columbine High School massacre in 1999. However, the openly hostile debates over the offering of thoughts and prayers, particularly in the aftermath of moral evil, have increased exponentially in the years since Jeselnik's comedic yet rather caustic critique of their supposed ineffectiveness and insincerity.

Echoing Jeselnik's assessment four years later in 2019, following the terrorist attacks on mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, U.S. House Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez asked, "What good are your thoughts and prayers when they don't even keep the pews safe?"⁴ Responding to such critiques of the supposed uselessness of thoughts and prayers, this thesis will defend the importance of sincere thoughts (and prayers for those who are religious) in response to evil and suffering by rejecting their alleged opposition to action and instead presenting both how they prepare people for action and how they coordinate that action.

Aided by the proliferation of social media—and especially the anonymity, visibility, and triviality frequently associated with online conversation—what was once largely perceived as an

³ Jeselnik, *Thoughts and Prayers*.

⁴ Bailey Vogt, "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on New Zealand Shootings: 'What Good Are Your Thoughts & Prayers,'" *The Washington Times* (March 15, 2019).

acceptable expression of compassion has increasingly drawn vitriolic and wearied denunciations of becoming a meaningless hashtag that invariably trends online in knee-jerk fashion after a tragedy, without actually *doing* anything substantive. In response to these accusations, corresponding justifications have worked to vindicate thoughts and prayers and to deem them necessary following a horrific tragedy especially because their potential immediacy and reach transcend the moral and practical constraints of time and distance. Following an explication of the overarching theme and argument of this thesis, the specific critiques and justifications of thoughts and prayers will be examined in more detail throughout this introduction.

These debates on thoughts and prayers largely focus on the binary between thoughts and prayers, on the one hand, and action, on the other. However, in doing so, those on both sides of the debate neglect the reality that thoughts and prayers and action do not necessarily represent mutually exclusive responses. They fail to take into account the value of *both* thoughts and prayers *and* action in order to avoid harmful reactions to evil and suffering as well as to effectively enact helpful responses. In this thesis, I intend to renarrate this false dichotomy between thoughts and prayers and action and defend the nature and effects of thoughts and prayers and their importance for informing action.

Within this reductive binary between thoughts and prayers and action, those focusing solely on thoughts and prayers often remain unproductively inactive, while those only advocating action often succumb to dangerous thoughtlessness. In doing so, each side regressively undermines its own effectiveness because the former does not think and pray as a precursor to helpful action but instead finds thoughts and prayers a wholly sufficient response, and the latter often commits uncompassionate and harmful thoughtless action uninformed by thoughts and prayers.

Although this research defends both thoughts and prayers as necessary companions of action, it will focus primarily on what thoughts and prayers have in common and will, therefore, concentrate primarily on thoughts. Although a discussion worth having, a focus on the diverse array of beliefs and practices with regard to religious prayer is beyond the scope of the present work. Renarrating this false and harmful dichotomy between thoughts and prayers, on the one hand, and action, on the other, this thesis will analyze the necessity of active thoughts and thoughtful action in the aftermath of tragedy due to their resistance to indifference, inaction, and thoughtless action the causes more harm than good.

In reconstructing the relationship between thoughts and prayers and action, this thesis will thus assert that holding thoughts and prayers and action as preclusive of or opposed to one another blindly overlooks alternative harmful responses to evil and suffering, and it inhibits more compassionate and productive responses. I propose that sincere thoughts and prayers, as an important precursor to action, prevent indifference and promote compassion and empathy, and they replace thoughtless harmful action by guiding intentional and helpful action.

Throughout the rest of this introduction, I will survey the principal critiques and defenses of thoughts and prayers to demonstrate the increasingly restrictive binary between thoughts and prayers and action in contemporary debates over how to respond to mass shootings. Following this overview, I will then renarrate this false binary by contrasting thoughtlessness and inaction with thoughtfulness and thoughtful action. This will be divided into three parts: (1) the damage caused by the indifference, untimely silence, and selfishness that result from *thoughtlessness*; (2) the alternative compassionate and helpful responses of attention, timely silence, and selflessness brought about by *thoughtfulness*; and (3) the prevention of *thoughtless harmful action* by

thoughtful action. Such an analysis will reveal thoughts and prayers as compassionate and effective responses to evil and suffering that both alleviate harm and prevent its repetition.

I now turn to the dominant indictments and defenses of thoughts and prayers that largely construct the binary between thoughts and prayers, on the one hand, and action, on the other, and that thus weaken and hinder effective responses to tragedy. The moral evil of mass shootings, rather than such natural evil as illness and natural disasters, represents the focus of this initial overview. Although the thoughts and prayers versus action debates apply to suffering inflicted by both moral and natural evil, the urgency and vitriol surfaces most fervently in situations in which the people responding feel the most able to take reactive and preventative measures towards suffering, namely moral evil. People feel most confident and responsible in response to human-caused evil. Direct and indirect witnesses to moral evil and human-caused suffering apprehend greater potential for control over such a problem, and they hope that such evil may be stopped, if only they perform an effective response. Contemporary debates on the subject largely center on the moral evil of mass shootings in particular because such horrific events invite utter disdain at complacent ideas of their inevitability, and the perceived solutions to the problem seem obvious yet vary widely depending on where a person falls in the thoughts and prayers and action debate.

The primary charges against thoughts and prayers focus on the lack of action associated with their (often silent) utterance. Compounded with their rejection of thoughts and prayers as actions in and of themselves, detractors of this response to evil and suffering accuse those offering thoughts and prayers of failing to do anything else, of simply repeating an inactive passive platitude as a cop out for further action. Those offering thoughts and prayers, critics argue, fail to *react* properly by declining to act in advance to prevent a similar tragedy from occurring again. In her article “How ‘Thoughts and Prayers’ Went From Common Condolence to

Cynical Meme,” AJ Willingham writes that “the repetition of mass shootings exists because no one is doing much else besides offering thoughts and prayers,” and she terms such inaction “civilian slacktivism.”⁵ Thoughts and prayers will not bring back the dead, and mere words will not stop the next massacre from happening.

Demonstrating this stance following the 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting, Mike Lacher created an online game titled “Thoughts and Prayers” in which players may click two buttons, “think” and “pray,” in a futile attempt to stop a mass shooting.⁶ Thoughts and prayers, Lacher contends, will not stop a bullet. Mirroring this critique, one citizen responded to the El Paso and Dayton shootings by stating, “Thoughts and prayers only help those who have been left behind after these tragedies. Prevention is better than cure, what are you really going to do about it?”⁷ Such a claim suggests that thoughts and prayers are not “really” doing something to prevent evil and suffering. Such critics as these argue that people must take substantial preemptive action rather than rely on intangible and inactive retrospective reflection post-tragedy that proves ineffective in preventing the next massacre.

Politicians receive particularly harsh criticism for offering thoughts and prayers while forgoing any concrete action. Critics direct their cynicism most strongly at the men and women who hold positions of influence that allow them to enact change yet who instead appear to evade obligation with a fruitless and hollow response. After the Santa Fe High School shooting, Houston police chief Art Acevedo wrote, “This isn’t a time for prayers, and study and inaction. It’s a time for prayers, action and the asking of God’s forgiveness for our inaction (especially the elected officials that ran to the cameras today, acted in a solemn manner, called for prayers, and

⁵ AJ Willingham, “How ‘Thoughts and Prayers’ Went from Common Condolence to Cynical Meme,” *CNN*, May 19, 2018.

⁶ Mike Lacher, “Thoughts and Prayers: The Game,” *Gap Arcade*, Everyday Arcade, accessed June 16, 2019.

⁷ Gemma (@out_of_ireland), “Prevention is better than cure,” Twitter post, August 5, 2019.

will once again do absolutely nothing).”⁸ Although Acevedo does not reject thoughts and prayers wholesale, he warns that “there will be a next time, based on the inaction of elected officials across this country.”⁹ Although the first half of this statement acknowledges the importance of prayers and study as well as prayerful action, Acevedo criticizes the politicians who only offer prayers and otherwise remain inactive. Prayers should not become a personal shield protecting politicians from the responsibility to act.

Echoing this critique of politicians’ inaction, the hashtag #policyandchange started trending after the Stoneman Douglas massacre as a rejoinder to thoughts and prayers and as an ironic extension of the cynicism expressed by the derisive use of the hashtag #thoughtsandprayers. In the face of the mass shootings of innocents at the hands of evil individuals, critics of people offering thoughts and prayers cast aspersions at politicians not fulfilling the duty of their office. Politicians, they argue, must focus on doing, not just saying, and saying, therefore, does not contain any element of doing.

Police Chief Art Acevedo qualified his critique by stating that “it’s a time for prayers, action and the asking of God’s forgiveness for our inaction.”¹⁰ However, many people take the argument against thoughts and prayers to the extreme by declaring that it is *never* the time to offer thoughts and prayers in response to or in potential prevention of tragedy. Rather than consenting to the offering of thoughts and prayers if also accompanied by “real” action, these critics declare thoughts and prayers wholly unnecessary and even inappropriate. They consider action and thoughts and prayers mutually exclusive, and they accuse the people who offer

⁸ Editorial Board, “Houston’s Police Chief Knows What’s Needed on Guns. It Isn’t Thoughts and Prayers,” *The Washington Post*, February 3, 2019; Ewan Palmer, “Santa Fe Shooting: Vote Out Politicians ‘Only Offering Prayers,’ Says Houston Police Chief,” *Newsweek*, May 21, 2018; Meagan Flynn, “Houston Police Chief ‘Hit Rock Bottom’ After Santa Fe Shooting. Then Came a Nasty Feud with the NRA,” *The Washington Post*, May 24, 2018.

⁹ Ewan Palmer, “Santa Fe Shooting,” *Newsweek*, May 21, 2018.

¹⁰ Palmer, “Santa Fe Shooting,” May 21, 2018.

thoughts and prayers today while promising to examine possible action tomorrow as simply making excuses until the short attention span of the fast-paced news cycle has been temporarily withdrawn from the issue once again. Politicians must focus on doing *rather than* saying.

Many detractors of thoughts and prayers find the response *wholly* improper in the aftermath of a mass shooting for a variety of reasons. They find the meaning and ramifications of the phrase problematic and even counterproductive in the pursuit of public safety. Critiques of the response, for example, often center on—and virtually all ultimately stem from—the semantic satiation associated with its presence in public discourse, which causes it to lose sincerity and, therefore, all intended meaning. Willingham expands her critique of “civilian slacktivism” by describing thoughts and prayers as not a genuine response to suffering but rather a phrase “embedded in our post-tragedy lexicon.”¹¹ The further the response is embedded in our repetitive response to tragedy, the more it becomes a hollow maxim, and the more contrary to its intentions it becomes: mechanical, reflexive, and paradoxically *thoughtless*. Seemingly less trite phrases such as “my heart goes out” and “my condolences” do not attract nearly the same amount of virulence as the overly familiar phrase “thoughts and prayers,” and the former are perceived as more genuinely and actively empathetic. When thoughts and prayers become “thoughts and prayers,” critics increasingly perceive this response as empty and useless.

This response to evil and suffering also draws this critique of being altogether inappropriate because it risks trivializing tragedy. People ask for and offer thoughts and prayers in much less important and comparatively frivolous situations: an upcoming school exam, the purchase of an overpriced cup of coffee, in support of sports teams, before a tough workout....When people carelessly and insincerely claim to be responding to such circumstances

¹¹ AJ Willingham, “Common Condolence to Cynical Meme,” *CNN*, May 19, 2018.

with thoughts and prayers, they associate this response with triviality, and they inevitably compromise or entirely sacrifice the gravity and authenticity necessary for the response to be appropriate following the incomparable suffering inflicted by an evil mass shooting.

Perhaps most significantly, those who criticize thoughts and prayers do so due to the hopelessness they seem to connote. They are seen as precluding any real action taken to prevent a repetition of the tragedy they only acknowledge. Critics argue that people who offer thoughts and prayers do so because they have resigned themselves to the situation and given in to a helplessness that undermines progress towards preventing evil. Offering thoughts and prayers seems to signify the ceding of responsibility to an intangible higher power and the concomitant abandonment of personal involvement in the active pursuit of a solution.

Reviling thoughts and prayers after the San Bernardino shooting, for example, the headline of the *New York Daily News* read “GOD ISN’T FIXING THIS” (as if it had some special insight or access to God).¹² Reliance on God seems to give people an excuse to bypass personal and communal responsibility. Outsourcing the solution to God makes the problem appear insurmountable, and it thus restrains the hope humans have towards the possibility of fixing it. In this sense, thoughts and prayers become inappropriate by symbolizing a blind hopelessness that forestalls action to fix the problem. More than just an excuse for inaction, thoughts and prayers, themselves not seen as an action, actually prevent real action.

This particular interpretation of the intrinsic hopelessness and helplessness of thoughts and prayers also reveals a deeper, more divisive criticism of the response. Indicative of the ever-growing secular-religious divide in the contemporary world, detractors of the latter half of the response deem prayers futile and ineffective because they are directed at best at an indifferent

¹² “God Isn’t Fixing This,” *The New York Daily News*, December 3, 2015; Caitlin Cruz, “New York Daily News Cover After San Bernardino: ‘GOD ISN’T FIXING THIS,’” *TPM*, December 3, 2015.

God and at worst an evil or nonexistent one. Following the Sri Lanka church bombings on Easter Sunday, UK voice artist Andy West wrote, “So prayers aren’t needed. In fact, prayers are proven beyond doubt to have no effect.”¹³ Similarly, critiques of thoughts focus on the ineffective offering of thoughts, or the unwilling or unwitting recipients of such thoughts—humans with ears actively resisting or simply not attuned to receiving such a message. These indictments deny any reach or power behind thoughts and prayers and view them simply as empty, irrational, and disingenuous faux actions directed in vain at a mere phantom. When thoughts and prayers emerge after a mass shooting, the religious and secular worlds shift from precarious coexistence towards alarming collision as critics denounce the reach and power of both thoughts and prayers.

A final criticism of thoughts and prayers particularly helps account for the recent rise in debates over the response, as well as the accompanying increase in the levels of vitriol associated with denunciations of them. In the age of social media, the spotlight created by online platforms corrupts the potentially good intentions behind the response, obscuring the effectiveness of thoughts and prayers or causing them to be abandoned altogether. Critics accuse people who post how they are responding to the tragedy online of doing so out of selfish motives: an egotistical desire for attention for oneself rather than a genuine expression of selfless compassion for the actual victims. Jeselnik continues his criticism by stating, “All you are doing is saying, ‘Don’t forget about me today’ ... ‘Lots of crazy distractions in the news, but don’t forget about how sad I am.’”¹⁴ Those who post condolences online are accused of only pretending to care, of expressing artificial concern for the purposes of self-promotion without actually having the thoughts they dishonestly announce in public. It requires minimal effort to write a quick “thoughts and prayers” online before moving on and not giving the tragedy a second thought—or even a real

¹³ Andy West (@AndyWestTV), “So prayers aren’t needed,” Twitter post, April 21, 2019.

¹⁴ Jeselnik, *Thoughts and Prayers*.

first one. With the potential for the far-reaching attention the internet affords, people often manipulate thoughts and prayers and, by extension, manipulate tragedy. Thoughts and prayers become an ill-motivated, insincere means for a selfish end.

These critiques, however, represent only one side of the increasingly polarizing debate over thoughts and prayers as a response to tragedy in general and mass shootings in particular. In the face of what Emma Green at *The Atlantic* calls “prayer shaming”—accompanied, I would add, with “thought shaming” that manifests simultaneously and in similar ways but to a much lesser degree of hostility—those who offer thoughts and prayers maintain their own reasons for doing so in the aftermath of a mass shooting, but they also justify thoughts and prayers in direct response to those who “turned their anger about the shooting not at the perpetrator or perpetrators...but at those who offered their prayers.”¹⁵ Rather than abandon this response in favor of more visible and supposedly more effective action, proponents find this response to tragedy worth defending in the face of these attacks.

Similar to those who criticize thoughts and prayers, defenders of the response also analyze its relationship to action. In separating thoughts and prayers and action, these defenders deem the former necessary contributions to post-tragedy response. One particular line of defense involves countering the indictment that the response simply represents an excuse for inaction. Proponents declare accusations of inaction shortsighted because such accusations fixate solely on that particular response and thus risk blinding critics to the broader context in which people offer thoughts and prayers. Thoughts and prayers represent an addition to, rather than a substitute for, action. One Twitter user—expressing a common sentiment among proponents of thoughts and prayers—writes, “Thoughts and prayers are love and they can go hand in hand with action.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Emma Green, “Prayer Shaming After a Mass Shooting in San Bernardino,” *The Atlantic*, December 2, 2015.

¹⁶ Better Call Stahl (@mikeastahl), Twitter post, April 28, 2019.

Similarly, in 2013, Pope Francis stated, “Prayer that doesn’t lead to concrete action toward our brothers is a fruitless and incomplete prayer....Prayer and action must always be profoundly united.”¹⁷ Thoughts and prayers, accompanied by action, represent an important response.

People who offer thoughts and prayers in the wake of tragedy are not necessarily doing nothing else. Offering thoughts and prayers does not prevent one from also donating blood to victims, contributing to medical and funeral costs, unequivocally condemning the violent ideology that incites such evil, fighting for safety through viable and productive policy changes, battling evident mental and communal health crises plaguing the nation, or taking any number of other actions in response to and in prevention of tragedy. Those who criticize thoughts and prayers as total passivity often study the response too narrowly, and this constricted vision causes them to overlook other activity that accompanies it.

Demonstrating this balance between religious and/or secular reflection and further action, in February 2018 the Dalai Lama wrote, “Although I am a Buddhist monk, I am skeptical that prayers *alone* will achieve world peace. We need instead to be enthusiastic and self-confident in taking action.”¹⁸ Similar to religious figures like Pope Francis, the Dalai Lama acknowledges the importance of prayer—comparatively, yet not exactly, applicable to its secular counterpart—while eschewing its exclusivity. Thoughts and prayers *alone* cannot prevent all evil, but the exigent demand for action does not preclude any and all need for thoughts and prayers.

Not only do thoughts and prayers not preclude action, but they also lead to action. Taking the idea of a need for thoughts and prayers in addition to action a step further, defenders of the phrase also seek to vindicate it by declaring thoughts and prayers a *reaction* that brings about real preemptive action. Whether offered to neighbors or to people halfway around the world,

¹⁷ Kerri Lenartowick, “Always Unite Prayer and Action, Pope Francis Says,” *Catholic News Agency* (July 21, 2013).

¹⁸ Dalai Lama (@DalaiLama), Twitter post, February 9, 2018, emphasis added.

thoughts and prayers represent an act of mourning that has tangible effects in the world both prior to and after a mass shooting. In response to Ocasio-Cortez's critique of thoughts and prayers following the Christchurch shooting, Catholic author and speaker Chris Stefanick writes, "Prayer is a movement of the heart that awakens it to the needs of others. Prayer invites the strength of God that will help those of faith whose families died in that mosque. Prayer changes things."¹⁹ An expression of collective grief, thoughts and prayers create solidarity between those offering them and the victims to or for whom they are given, and they also unequivocally condemn the evil perpetrated in an effort to dissuade others from committing similar evil acts. Thoughts and prayers can inspire and create positive change, and they may prove a productive preventative measure against future evil and suffering.

This idea of thoughts and prayers as not entirely passive connects to the distinction between thoughts and prayers. Proponents of thoughts and prayers argue that religious prayers and both secular and religious thought effect internal change that works towards preventing mass shootings and providing support to those left suffering in their wake. An immoral or amoral world breeds further evil, but thoughts and prayers help counteract both moral collapse and, in the case of the latter, religious decay. With regard to thoughts, those offering them go beyond the self and connect with fellow human beings to condemn such evil, and in doing so, they help repair the social fabric whose fraying contributes to moral decay. With regard to prayers, the people offering them likewise go beyond the finite self, but they do so by appealing to a higher and greater power for healing and for the changing of hearts and minds. Despite increasingly hostile attacks, those who offer thoughts and prayers thus continue to do so because of both

¹⁹ Chris Stefanick, (@ChrisStefanick), Twitter post, March 15, 2019.

secular and religious motives, and effects of the response induce real internal change—a precursor to external change—by encouraging compassion within individuals and communities.

People who offer and defend thoughts and prayers also recognize the distinction between politicians and civilians. For people not elected to public office, thoughts and prayers often represent the only available and indeed the only appropriate *immediate* response to tragedy. Although these defenders of thoughts and prayers declare it *always* the time and place to think and pray, this is particularly true in the direct aftermath of a mass shooting. When little time has passed and when distance between the people responding and victims is great, thoughts and prayers allow participation in mourning, bypassing distance to establish solidarity in suffering. One Twitter user expresses this widespread sentiment by noting, “But for some – all they have to show love are thoughts and prayers. It is a way to show Brotherhood and solidarity.”²⁰ To fail to acknowledge such suffering would contradict the common humanity we share. Responding to tragedy usually requires that grief be felt and shared before action is taken, not in lieu of it, and thoughts and prayers represent a conducive and accessible avenue for doing so. Thoughts and prayers may be offered by and for anybody, anywhere, and they serve to condemn evil and to prevent the obscuration of suffering often caused by political debates. As such, people defend thoughts and prayers because the immediacy and the semblance of proximity they provide represent a timely expression of empathy when distance prohibits other responses, and they allow the “do something” to start at home rather than in Washington.

The politicians in Washington who also defend thoughts and prayers face particularly virulent cries of “do something.” In response to these critiques, these politicians note that shouting “do something” into the ether or typing it into the online void without identifying that

²⁰ Wandering Mind (@PonderingMindz), Twitter post, April 29, 2019.

“something” proves no more, or even less, effective or productive than offering thoughts and prayers. As David Harsanyi at *The Federalist* writes, “You don’t have a plan to protect innocent men, women, and children. You have a hashtag [#dosomething] to placate them.”²¹ Instead of empty words, practical, effectual change must be made by politicians after analysis of the facts relating to mass shootings. Whether that change involves new policy proposals or more effectively enforcing existing laws depends on consistent and honest analysis of the full reality of the situation. However, the politicians on this side of the debate argue that offering thoughts and prayers proves the proper immediate response to tragedy while such an investigation remains ongoing. Thoughts and prayers acknowledge tragedy and express necessary compassion, appropriately permitting emotion and empathy to reign in the direct aftermath of a tragedy, but they do not preclude doing something once that something has been clearly identified, through contextual research, as sensible and feasible.

Another response to the criticism that thoughts and prayers are offered with selfish motives is that those offering thoughts and prayers do so out of selfless generosity. In his article “Do ‘Thoughts and Prayers’ Do Any Good?,” Tyler Huckabee writes, “It’s comforting for us to be able to offer some little piece of ourselves.”²² Such a thought can be misconstrued as focusing on the selfishness of the giver, proud of his or her own generosity. However, the sentiment behind it instead implies a more selfless idea that even those not directly suffering from the tragedy refuse to remain indifferent, and they instead voluntarily take on a degree of pain in order to express compassion and establish solidarity with the real victims. Maintaining this integrity of motives in turn proves essential to protecting thoughts and prayers from the mechanical, reflexive, self-righteous expression of them that nullifies their effect and meaning.

²¹ David Harsanyi, “‘Do Something!’ is Not Going to Stop Mass Shootings,” *The Federalist*, August 5, 2019.

²² Tyler Huckabee, “Do ‘Thoughts and Prayers’ Do Any Good?,” *Relevant*, February 16, 2018.

Although many more indictments and defenses of thoughts and prayers exist, those discussed here nonetheless provide a representative sample of the most compelling arguments—ideas to which neither side lives up—advanced by each side of the debate. My intention is not to assess the particular validity of each of these arguments but rather to challenge their seemingly intractably polemical nature and instead place them in conversation with one another while defending thoughts and prayers as a worthwhile and useful response to tragedy.

Each resurgence of the argument over thoughts and prayers—which, indicative of the high stakes, occurs invariably with every new mass shooting—further entrenches people on their respective sides of the issue. People speak from their various pulpits: impugning the assumed motives of those seen as the “other,” caricaturizing and condemning their viewpoints to a highly distorting extent, and consequently adding to the polarization that paralyzes people attempting to make a difference. This vicious cycle spirals downwards as people firmly—yet unintentionally counterproductively—ensconce themselves either in opposition to or in defense of *either* thoughts and prayers *or* action and refuse to try to understand the point of view of the other side.

Such polemics, as surveyed here, form the backdrop of this thesis. In defiance of this trend of debilitating polarization, the ongoing and problematic devolution of debates over thoughts and prayers versus action must be reversed to favor conversation rather than argument. Only then can these debates prove productive in confronting and preventing evil and reducing suffering, whether inflicted by mass shootings or by other causes. The ever-growing contention presents a false binary that mistakenly leaves little room for middle ground or a third route. Emma Green at *The Atlantic* states, “These two reactions, policy-making and praying, are

portrayed as mutually exclusive, coming from totally contrasting worldviews.”²³ Similarly, Tyler Huckabee writes,

In this worldview, there are two options: pray or act. Some people are content to sit around, heads bowed and hands folded, all but inviting another mass killing tomorrow. Others understand that the time for prayer has ended and now is the time to act. That’s a very stark binary.²⁴

The thoughts and prayers and policy or action debates often get so mired in one another that people begin to erroneously view it as an either/or issue. For both sides to operate more effectively in relation to the mass shootings that *everyone* (except the deranged and evil few) unequivocally condemns, a more nuanced, less combative view of thoughts and prayers is needed so that thoughts and prayers may be offered sincerely and, therefore, productively alongside necessarily thoughtful and prayerful action.

Thoughts and prayers—the latter religious and the former both secular and religious—represent an important and practical, if not sufficient, response to the evil and suffering of mass shootings. I will examine how sincere thoughts and prayers represent a valuable response to evil and suffering and may not be unduly relegated to a position of worthlessness. Rejecting and deconstructing the action versus thoughts and prayers binary, this thesis will discuss alternative harmful responses to evil and suffering which that binary overlooks and analyze what it actually means to offer thoughts and prayers in the aftermath of such tragedy. Thoughts and prayers prove a far more compassionate and productive response to evil and suffering than do thoughtlessness and inaction, and when undertaken and offered, thoughts and prayers—although not actions in and of themselves—actually *do* something to fight against evil and alleviate suffering.

²³ Emma Green, “Prayer Shaming,” *The Atlantic*, December 2, 2015.

²⁴ Huckabee, “Do ‘Thoughts and Prayers’ Do Any Good?,” February 16, 2018.

Thoughts and prayers prove necessary to combat indifference and thoughtless harmful action as well as to promote the productive responses of compassion and thoughtful action. As mentioned above, this renarration of the relationship between thoughts and prayers and action, in defense of the former, will be divided into three parts: (1) the damage caused by the indifference, untimely silence, and selfishness that result from *thoughtlessness*, (2) the compassionate and helpful responses of attention, timely silence, and selflessness caused by *thoughtfulness*, and (3) the prevention of *thoughtless harmful action* by *thoughtful action*. Thus necessary in and of themselves as well as in their accompaniment of action, sincere thoughts and prayers prove compassionate and effective responses to evil and suffering that both alleviate harm and prevent its repetition.

I will, for the sake of simplicity, focus mostly on thoughts, but in doing so, I also intend to imply the nature and effects that prayers have in common with thoughts. Although a discussion of the specific effects of prayer is certainly worth having, such a discussion would distract from my main intent to demonstrate that thoughts and prayers are worth much *more than nothing* because they help prevent evil and suffering through compassion and the action that compassion generates. Rather than focus on the infinitely variable means and methods of prayers among different religious individuals and communities, my analysis of thoughts will encompass what prayers share with thoughts, namely the ability to generate compassion and consequently motivate and inform meaningful action. The thoughtlessness and thoughtfulness analyzed below also implies prayerlessness and prayerfulness.

In Part I, I will examine alternative responses to evil and suffering that are obscured by the debates about thoughts and prayers. Erroneously condemning thoughts and prayers as meaningless and ineffective overlooks truly condemnable thoughtless responses. The alternatives

of indifference, untimely silence, and selfishness represent far worse reactions—or lack thereof—to evil than thoughts and prayers. These harmful alternatives lead to nothing except the preservation of the status quo and even potential regression due to their apathetic unproductivity and their complacent counterproductivity. I will analyze the meaning and effects of these harmful thoughtless responses to demonstrate how thoughts and prayers are certainly not worth “less than nothing.”²⁵ Thoughtlessness proves worse than nothing because it perpetuates and exacerbates evil and suffering.

Presenting alternatives to these harmful responses of thoughtlessness in Part II, I will analyze the value and practicality of thoughts and prayers as a response to evil and suffering that actually achieves positive and critical results through the compassion and empathy they generate and share. Thoughts and prayers represent the thoughtfulness opposite the thoughtlessness of indifference, untimely silence, and selfishness because they instead promote and perform attention, timely silence, and selflessness. Addressing what thoughts and prayers *are*, this second part of my thesis will examine how thoughts and prayers represent a positive response to evil and suffering much preferred over the harmful alternative responses because thoughts and prayers lead the people who undertake them to empathize and extend compassion to victims and also to condemn the evil perpetrated. Genuine thoughts and prayers are worth much *more* than nothing because they represent a compassionate “being with” the victims of suffering and an unequivocal “being against” the evil committed. For people who witness or hear about suffering to not respond to suffering others with such compassion and moral determination would be both inhumane and counterproductive, and thoughtfulness thus proves significant and productive.

²⁵ Jeselnik, *Thoughts and Prayers*.

After this discussion of thoughtfulness, I will examine in Part III what thoughts and prayers *do*. In addition to indifference, untimely silence, and selfishness, thoughtless action represents another alternative response to evil and suffering. Although often lost in the debate that pits thoughts and prayers against action, thoughts and prayers inform helpful and responsible reactions and preventative actions against evil and suffering. Thoughtful action proves a much more productive response than inaction, which does *nothing* by providing no help, and than thoughtless action, which is often *worse* than doing nothing because it risks causing more harm than good. Further deconstructing the false binary between thoughts and prayers and action, I will explore how these two responses cannot be fully separated because the most effective action against evil and suffering is thoughtful and prayerful. This analysis will further demonstrate that thoughts and prayers represent a real and active response to evil and suffering and cannot simply be condemned as precluding action.

In renarrating the relationship between thoughts and action, I intend no conflation of the two. Thoughts are not action and action is not thought. However, the two must inform rather than preclude each other in response to evil and suffering. The various critiques and defenses of thoughts and prayers do not have to remain mutually exclusive, and a conversation between the two can forward the common objective of both: preventing evil and suffering such as mass shootings. Thoughts prove valuable in response to tragedy, and action has a greater chance of success if that action is undertaken thoughtfully.

Thoughts and prayers prove more productive than harmful alternative responses to evil and suffering, and the meaning and effects of thoughts and prayers belie their condemnation as a meaningless and useless response by people who erroneously advocate action at the expense of thoughts and prayers, as if thoughts and prayers were utterly insignificant and ineffective. When

done in good faith—when offered sincerely with true intent and not as a substitute for further action—thoughts and prayers prove meaningful, practical, and necessary in response to evil and suffering because *thoughtful compassion* and *thoughtful action* help to alleviate and prevent harm. Active thoughts and prayers as well as thoughtful and prayerful action prove crucial in confronting evil and alleviating suffering. As such, thoughts and prayers defy Jeselnik’s claim and are worth much more than nothing.²⁶

I. Thoughtlessness

Holding thoughts and prayers and action as mutually exclusive and completely distinct responses overlooks alternative harmful responses to evil and suffering. Thoughtlessness fills the void left when people with the ability to respond to suffering neglect both thoughts and prayers and action. In this discussion of thoughtlessness in Part I, I will analyze the negative impact of the void left when people with the ability to respond to tragedy do *not* offer thoughts and prayers and instead remain thoughtless. A discussion of the helpful alternative to thoughtlessness will follow in Part II with an examination of thoughtfulness.

Focusing primarily or even solely on thoughts and prayers versus action directs the discussion away from other responses such as indifference, untimely silence, and selfishness. These destructive alternatives—distinct yet not entirely different in cause, nature, and effect—prove harmful in response to evil and suffering even though they occur all too often, almost by default, when people fail to actively think. All three disrupt the distinction between thought and action by a dialectical relationship between thoughtlessness and inaction, but their emphasis falls on thoughtlessness rather than inaction. Here in Part I, I will look at these thoughtless responses—(a) indifference, (b) untimely silence, and (c) selfishness—and in Part II I will

²⁶ Jeselnik, *Thoughts and Prayers*.

analyze their thoughtful opposites of attention, timely silence, and selflessness. Part III will shift the emphasis to action by examining the contrast between thoughtless harmful action and the meaningful and useful response of thoughtful and prayerful action.

Turning now to an analysis of indifference, untimely silence, and selfishness, I will demonstrate that completely rejecting thoughts and prayers leads to thoughtlessness that fails to combat the evil of and suffering caused by mass shootings in particular and by other natural and moral evils in general. The thoughtlessness of these responses proves insensitive to victims and counterproductive in preventing evil. These responses, which take the place of absent thoughts and prayers, represent an uncompassionate amorality and/or immorality which reveals the worthlessness and the dire ramifications of doing nothing or worse than nothing in response to mass shootings and other evils.

a. Indifference

Indifference, an apathetic *lack* of interest or concern, represents a harmful response to evil and suffering opposite the positive response of thoughts and prayers. To the indifferent, the act of evil and its terrible aftermath stirs no feeling or thought and elicits no reaction, and the horror thus falls so far short of its full gravity and import as to remain altogether unimportant. Necessary sympathy for the victims and disdain and condemnation of the perpetrator does not surface, and unimpassioned, the apathetic individual who learns about or witnesses evil and suffering claims no personal responsibility to think or act in reaction to the situation. To remain indifferent in the aftermath of tragedy represents an immoral response that not only fails to counteract or alleviate the situation or to provide any productive solutions but that also helps exacerbate the problem through the neutrality, lack of awareness, and detachment it causes. Each

of these negative effects of indifference after tragedy will be examined in turn to demonstrate the harm that accompanies thoughtlessness.

Between 1933 and 1941, the interval leading to the systematic mass killings of the Holocaust, the passing of more and more laws against Jews increasingly imposed arbitrary and cruel definitions, regulations, and restrictions upon these entirely innocent people. Many of the responses—or lack thereof—of witnesses and bystanders to the injustices and atrocities of these laws serve as a prime illustration of the consequential indifference that resulted from thoughtless acceptance of these laws. The indifference of witnesses and bystanders in Germany during this era contributed to the escalation of injustice and cruelty against Jews, and the human cost, though unimaginable in 1933, proved horrifically great. Although the Nazis persecuted Jews through the passing of unjust and oppressive laws against them, the laws affecting and targeting innocent schoolchildren particularly exposed the harmful repercussions that come from thoughtlessness. The following analysis will demonstrate as much by discussing the neutrality, ignorance, and detachment caused by thoughtless indifference.

Neutrality—a harmful, untimely non-stance that involves the assumption of apathy wholly unsuitable for fighting evil and preventing suffering—represents one potentially detrimental consequence of the assumption of indifference post-tragedy. As Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel noted in his speech “The Perils of Indifference” delivered on April 12, 1999, for the Millennium Lecture series, indifference means “no difference,” and it leads to “a strange and unnatural state in which the lines blur between light and darkness, dusk and dawn, crime and punishment, cruelty and compassion, good and evil.”²⁷ By so obscuring the lines between good and evil, indifference makes it easy to refuse or simply fail to choose a side or take a stand

²⁷ Elie Wiesel, “The Perils of Indifference,” *Millennium Lecture Series*, April 12, 1999.

against evil and suffering, and indeed it ensures the absence of any feeling of the vital need to do so. Indifference breeds the disinterested and “safe” non-position of neutrality which promotes no values and contributes nothing to morality. Although neutrality is not inherently harmful, the neutrality caused by indifference impedes the confrontation of evil and suffering because the neutral individual fails to discern the evil and engage in the fight against it.

Neutrality itself is never truly neutral, especially with regard to questions of evil and suffering. Neutrality leads to non-participation and non-interference, and it thus does not create and even obstructs necessary change—to the detriment of those suffering from the infliction of the evil about which indifferent people refuse to take a stand. In a different speech—his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize on December 10, 1986—Wiesel declared, “We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim.”²⁸ Echoing this sentiment when discussing the ramifications of non-thinking in “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” Hannah Arendt states, “The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their mind to be either bad or good.”²⁹ Neutrality, a response caused by indifference, leads to harmful negligence and the perpetuation of the evil within the status quo as well as the potential exacerbation of the problem. The failure to take deliberate action and the continuation of passivity and lack of interest harms current and future victims by refusing to alleviate their pain or to solve the presence and repetition of evil. The non-neutral neutrality thus proves a failure of moral integrity which harms through negligence, and its negative consequences trend in only one direction: against the victim.

This neutrality resulting from thoughtless indifference inflicted significant harm upon innocent Jewish schoolchildren beginning in 1933. As antisemitic laws and sentiment increased,

²⁸ Elie Wiesel, “Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech” (Oslo, December 10, 1986).

²⁹ Hannah Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations” (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 180.

people began to choose sides. Revealing the existence of opposition to the new laws, “random kindnesses and quiet expressions of sympathy for Jews by Germans were not uncommon,” but such sentiments did not prevail as the years progressed.³⁰ The memoir of the German Jewish woman Marta Appel notes,

Almost every lesson began to be a torture for Jewish children. There was not one subject anymore which was not used to bring up the Jewish question. And in the presence of Jewish children the teachers denounced all the Jews, without exception, as scoundrels and as the most destructive force in every country where they were living...³¹

Despite these opportunities for either kindness or evil, however, the majority of people failed to take any side, as evinced by the pervasive silence that permitted these injustices to continue and escalate. Many witnesses and bystanders indifferently “never made up their mind to be either bad or good” and failed to consider the issue as a good versus evil moral decision, instead remaining neutral.³² The lack of significant examples of people—whether teachers, classmates, parents, or individuals within the general public—speaking out against this persecution reveals the thoughtless apathy that many people maintained and that consequentially led to lack of moral concern. Indifference caused people to not take a definitive stand against the injustices and persecution.

Although seemingly insignificant because of its avoidance of any stake in the moral argument against evil and for good, this indifferent neutrality actually inflicted even more harm upon the children already suffering from legal persecution and emotional cruelty. The failure of people to take a definitive stand to aid these innocent children both harmed the children in the moment and also laid the foundation for even more persecution. Antisemitic laws led to more

³⁰ David Engel, “Responding to Persecution: Perceiving the Threat” in *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2013).

³¹ Engel, “A German Jewish Woman Describes Her Experience in the Early Nazi Years” in *The Holocaust*.

³² Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 180.

such laws precisely because bystanders indifferently adjusted to the new reality and thoughtlessly, and thus unresistingly, accepted the new laws as fact. If bystanders had openly and conspicuously expressed concern for the Jews and worked towards alleviating and preventing their oppression, perhaps the escalation of evil could have reversed into an escalation of good. One teacher rejecting indifferent neutrality and kindly welcoming Jewish children into schools could have precipitated an outpouring of similar kindnesses and helped halt the intensifying evil.

At the turn of the twentieth century, English theologian G.K. Chesterton wrote that “impartiality...is a pompous name for indifference, which is an elegant name for ignorance.”³³ In addition to harmful neutrality or impartiality, indifference to evil and suffering leads to ignorance, or a lack of knowledge and awareness, of the crisis at hand. Indifference engenders disinterest and prompts people to ignore or disregard information surrounding the causes and effects of a crisis or crime, and people do not, or cannot, respond to disasters they know nothing about. Consequently, indifference leads to ignorance and ignorance perpetuates indifference in an endless and vicious ouroboric cycle; a lack of awareness of the true nature of evil and suffering fails to generate a desire to respond to evil and suffering because the indifferent do not truly understand either one. In the case of particularly heinous crimes and intense suffering, such unawareness leads to disastrous unconcern and inattention—or, more accurately due to its thoughtlessness, it fails to motivate compassionate concern and thoughtful consideration that could help to alleviate the pain experienced. Ignorance maintained by indifference, and vice versa, proves a harmful response to evil and suffering because people cannot think about or act upon something about which they seek to know or understand nothing.

³³ Gilbert Keith Chesterton, “Puritan and Anglican,” *The Speaker*, December 15, 1900.

With regard to the persecution of Jewish schoolchildren, ignorance involved the failure of witnesses to think and discern for themselves. In Germany, “schoolchildren were taught that Jews were a danger to humanity,” and by 1937, “Jewish schoolchildren, though initially permitted to attend German state schools, were subjected to constant harassment by teachers and fellow students.”³⁴ Teachers indoctrinated their students—impressionable children—into the antisemitic ideology propagated by the state, and the false “knowledge” imposed on these children led them to uncompassionately harass their innocent classmates. The lack of awareness of true knowledge imposed on these non-Jewish classmates made them unconcerned for and thus partake in the plight of Jewish children. Their imposed ignorance perpetuated their thoughtless approach towards the laws persecuting the Jews, and this lack of true knowledge with regard to the injustice of the laws led to these bystanders’ failure to take a stand against this persecution—although it did not nullify their responsibility to do so. Ignorance led to indifference, which then led to increased harm.

Moreover, the thoughtless ignorance of bystanders—not just teachers and children—living throughout Germany in the 1930s also reveals possible consequences of indifference. Although the conclusion of such persecution and laws against Jews, including schoolchildren, remained unimaginable to contemporaries and only became perceptible in hindsight with millions dead, witnesses to incremental injustices in the moment remained responsible for progressive escalation. The ignorant thoughtlessness of contemporaries failed to recognize the inherent immorality in persecuting schoolchildren simply because they were Jewish. Ignorance led to indifference, and vice versa, and that indifference permitted and caused real evil.

³⁴ Engel, “A Step-By-Step Process?” in *The Holocaust*; Engel, “Perceiving the Threat” in *The Holocaust*.

In addition to neutrality and ignorance, indifference causes people capable of responding to evil and suffering to instead detach themselves from the situation and refuse the call to respond. Detachment causes aloofness as the indifferent remove and distance themselves from the situation, and they refuse to engage with problems no matter how pressing—or indeed even precisely because of how pressing. As Wiesel stated, rather than become emotionally involved in a horrific act of evil and suffering which greatly costs responders who decide to engage and invest themselves in the situation, indifference

can be tempting—more than that, seductive. It is so much easier to look away from victims. It is so much easier to avoid such rude interruptions to our work, our dreams, our hopes. It is, after all, awkward, troublesome, to be involved in another person's pain and despair.³⁵

In such a fundamentally selfish view, the indifferent avoid the claims of suffering. They find it much less taxing and much more secure and comforting to blind themselves to the pain of others and to thus refuse the “troublesome” vulnerability and openness that accompanies a true encounter with those suffering.³⁶ By distancing themselves and refusing to respond either morally or emotionally to the suffering of another, the indifferent avoid the trouble and pain that suffering alongside—although differently from—victims would inevitably entail.

However, although easier for the people who learn about suffering, such indifferent detachment hurts those most incapable of escaping from the pain in that way—namely, the victims. Disengaging from the crisis stymies helpful responsiveness to the suffering because it ensures the absence of any feeling of compassion, empathy, or personal responsibility to work for the alleviation of suffering. The detached indifferent cannot actually *be* there for those suffering, nor do they *do* anything to help them, because they focus on their own self rather than

³⁵ Wiesel, “The Perils of Indifference.”

³⁶ Wiesel, “The Perils of Indifference.”

turning outward towards another. Moreover, detachment leads to a failure to even recognize the victims. Wiesel continued, “Yet, for the person who is indifferent, his or her neighbor is of no consequence. And, therefore, their lives are meaningless. Their hidden or even visible anguish is of no interest. Indifference reduces the other to an abstraction.”³⁷ Failing to personally and directly engage with the concrete reality of evil and suffering—refusing to recognize and respond to the needs of people in pain and despair—proves reprehensible and harmful because it allows the selfishly indifferent people who indirectly learn about the crisis, rather than directly experience it, to shelter themselves from the damage, while the suffering others who cannot safely remove themselves in that manner consequently receive no comfort or aid.

As laws against the Jews increased, the distance between Jewish schoolchildren and their classmates and teachers widened and made even more persecution towards Jews tolerated precisely because that distance made suffering more invisible and thus easier to ignore. Even prior to complete expulsion from state schools,

as the situation for Jewish children in state schools became untenable, the *Reichsvertretung* organized Jewish schools. By 1937, some 24,000 elementary and secondary school pupils, representing 61 per cent of the Jewish school age population, attended 160 *Reichsvertretung* educational institutions.³⁸

In November of 1938, after years of accumulating discrimination, state schools expelled Jewish children altogether.³⁹ The distance between Jewish children and children still permitted to attend state schools inevitably made it easier to look away from this particular injustice and to abandon victims because their plight no longer stared perpetrators and witnesses directly in the face at school every day. Distance enabled thoughtless indifference because victims could be abandoned and forgotten when their pain and despair remained out of sight and thus out of mind.

³⁷ Wiesel, “The Perils of Indifference.”

³⁸ Engel, “Communal Leadership: Coping and Resisting” in *The Holocaust*.

³⁹ Engel, “A Step-By-Step Process?” in *The Holocaust*.

As demonstrated by the injustices committed against innocent and helpless Jewish schoolchildren in Germany particularly between 1933 and 1941, indifference, therefore, inevitably proves an immoral response to evil and suffering. Doing nothing to combat evil and suffering and indeed even perpetuating their horrors, indifference to evil and suffering leads to harmful neutrality, ignorance, and detachment, which then lead to more indifference. People who remain indifferent to evil and suffering variously aid and abet the perpetrator by their unwillingness to counter his or her crimes, and they fail to adequately acknowledge and meet the needs of victims. Indifference deceives thoughtless and inactive bystanders into a false sense of security because of their blindly perceived distance from the crime and its horrific aftermath.

Similar to the example of injustices afflicting Jewish schoolchildren, a more general yet particularly poignant example of harmful indifference appears in the poem entitled “First They Came...” in response to the events leading up to the Holocaust. In 1946 German Lutheran pastor Martin Nieöller confessed,

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—
 Because I was not a socialist.
 Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—
 Because I was not a trade unionist.
 Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
 Because I was not a Jew.
 Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.⁴⁰

This poem combines the various harmful effects of indifference. The indifferent inattention paid to the growing number of victims involves the narrator of the poem refusing to take a side definitively against the perpetrators and for the victims; not recognizing the potential escalation of the crisis; and dissociating himself from the victims by emphasizing his non-victim status and thus supposedly his non-responsibility.

⁴⁰ Martin Niemöller, “First they came...” *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Despite the expanding violence, the speaker of this poem—largely representative of witnesses at the time, save the thoughtful few—remains supposedly safe by maintaining impartial distance from the crimes and the growing crisis. Ignoring those targeted and feeling secure in the false assumption, made in inattentive ignorance, that the violence inflicted upon others would not overcome him as well, the bystander remains indifferent to the plight of others, and the evil catches this indifferent witness unaware and unprepared. This indifference causes real harm not only to the witness but to the countless others to whom the witness remains indifferent while indifference still remains an option. This poem, therefore, demonstrates the inattentive nature and consequential harmful effects of indifference.

Further demonstrating the immense harm indifference may cause, in his testimony *Survival in Auschwitz*, or *If This is a Man*, Holocaust survivor Primo Levi recounts a dream that many victims repeatedly experienced while in Auschwitz. In this dream, Levi tells his story (the testimony in this book) to his sister and many other people, but he laments,

I cannot help noticing that my listeners do not follow me. In fact, they are completely indifferent: they speak confusedly of other things among themselves, as if I was not there. My sister looks at me, gets up and goes away without a word. A desolating grief is now born in me...It is pain in its pure state, not tempered by a sense of reality and by the intrusion of extraneous circumstances, a pain like that which makes children cry.⁴¹

This recurring “collective dream” of the “unlistened-to-story” demonstrates the harm that indifference can inflict on victims because people who remain indifferent ignore and refuse to respond to and meet victims’ needs.⁴² Levi and other victims possessed a very real fear that other people would not listen to their story or spare them a serious thought, and the intense grief that this inflicted reveals the harm of indifference.

⁴¹ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Touchstone Book, Simon & Schuster, 1986), 60-61.

⁴² Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 60-61.

Elie Wiesel wholeheartedly condemned indifference by asserting, “The opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it’s indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it’s indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, but indifference, indifference between life and death.”⁴³ Indifference thus proves a harmful reaction to evil and suffering. Indifference, which follows from thoughtlessness, represents a response opposed to love and life and heralding only more hate and death.

b. Untimely Silence

Unlike indifference, silence does not always and inevitably prove an immoral, wholly inadequate response to evil and suffering. Depending on its full intent and effect, silence can represent a sensitive and productive response or an insensitive and counterproductive one. Timely silence, to be discussed in the following section through an analysis of the Book of Job, demonstrates thoughtful and, therefore, responsive compassion for and awareness of the suffering victim. Encountering, acknowledging, and reacting to Job’s suffering, Job’s friends sit with him for seven days in responsive silence, demonstrating sympathy and extending consolation through human connectivity.⁴⁴ However, the silence of Job’s friends in particular response to the suffering undergone by Job does not represent a universally and perpetually appropriate and productive response to all suffering at all times. The untimely silence of responders, when maintained thoughtlessly, often proves harmful and ineffective in the aftermath and prevention of evil.

⁴³ Elie Wiesel, “One Must Not Forget,” interview by Alvin P. Sanoff, *US News & World Report* (October 27, 1986).

⁴⁴ Job’s friends are not usually cited as exemplars in responding to the suffering of others. Their efforts to justify Job’s suffering by searching for some cause for it are typically given as examples of what *not* to do in the face of another’s suffering. However, I am highlighting their often overlooked initial response to Job’s suffering; after hearing of Job’s suffering, they immediately come to Job’s side and share in his silence with him.

People who encounter suffering all too often maintain insensitive and counterproductive silence that manifests as a harmful response. Although Job initially responds to his own suffering with silence and although his friends react to that response by remaining silent themselves, every person who encounters a victim, even a silent victim, does not necessarily prove responsive by remaining silent themselves because silence *per se* does not inevitably or necessarily work to combat evil and reduce suffering. More often than not, silence represents passive thoughtlessness that achieves nothing and indeed only serves to increase and perpetuate evil and suffering.

Undue inattentive silence—rather than the silence that naturally and rightly occurs when one listens and reacts to the specific needs of the suffering individual—produces deleterious effects particularly (1) by failing to provide any consolation to those in pain and distress; (2) by providing a path for witnesses to reject responsibility and detach themselves from the claims that the suffering of others imposes on them; and (3) by refusing to expose and condemn evil in a preventative measure against its repetition. Each of these effects of silence in the face of evil and suffering will be examined in turn to thus reveal the damage it may cause.

Untimely and inattentive silence represents an uncompassionate response to evil and suffering in part because it prevents victims from receiving any consolation that could potentially alleviate their pain and despair. When people remain callously silent in the presence or within the perception of victims who have expressed a need for dialogue, they fail to provide any help or healing or benefit to those suffering, and this failure to build up and encourage victims serves to instead further tear them down by leaving them feeling ignored and alienated. Utterly forsaken in their need, those suffering thus experience both helplessness and hopelessness. Onlookers with the voice to reach into and break the solitude of those suffering victims, who are ready and who desire comfort and support, instead desert these victims by remaining silent and distant.

In the 2001 study “A Model for Consolation,” researchers analyzed and interpreted the meaning of consolation both to the person who mediates it as well as to the person who receives it—the person responding and the victim, respectively. This study proves informative in the variously (un)timely and (un)compassionate possibilities of silence and dialogue. Recognizing the need for consolation in suffering, the study describes suffering as “a kind of alienation and a threat against a person’s identity, integrity, and connectedness.”⁴⁵ Only through the communion of compassionate silence and consoling dialogue between the person who mediates consolation, or the person responding, and the person who receives consolation, or the suffering victim, can each maintain an “openness, presence and availability.”⁴⁶ That availability creates a connection of mutual trust, which allows for “goodness, beauty, light, life and joy”—for help and healing.⁴⁷ When a person responding becomes ready to listen and speak and when a victim expresses a readiness to receive consolation, timely and compassionate silence and dialogue provide an avenue for healing through connection and understanding. However, refusing to offer that connection and understanding represents a failure of compassion and prevents consolation.

This study reveals the negative consequences that occur when a person in a position to respond fails to console a victim ready to receive such consolation. When a responder remains closed, absent, and unavailable, the ensuing silence leaves the already only partially bridgeable gap between direct or indirect witness and victim altogether unbridged, and the victim remains utterly alienated and forced to grapple with suffering alone. Lacking the connection which brings life and joy, the victim receives none of the succor that dialogic exchange, that relational speech, may bring. Rather than begin to heal, the victim’s suffering instead becomes compounded with a

⁴⁵ Astrid Norberg, Monica Bergsten, Berit Lundman and Medicinska fakulteten, Institutionen för omvårdnad, Originator Umeå universitet, “A Model of Consolation,” *Nursing Ethics*, vol. 8, no. 6, 2001, pp. 544-553.

⁴⁶ Norberg, et al., “A Model of Consolation,” 548.

⁴⁷ Norberg, et al., “A Model of Consolation,” 549.

feeling of helpless solitude. The inattentive silence which distances the responder from the victim and abandons the victim in despair thus proves harmful because it provides no help or hope and withholds the giving and receiving of consolation and encouragement.

Silence also has the potential to represent a dangerous response to evil and suffering because, like indifference, it provides a path for people who learn about or directly encounter suffering to reject responsibility and detach themselves from the claims that the suffering of others imposes on them. Silence permits both direct and indirect witnesses to ensconce themselves in a self-imposed solitude of unaccountability. The refusal to engage in discourse against evil and/or in dialogue with suffering victims and other responders permits silent responders to distance themselves from the situation and avoid any participation in resolving or preventing crises. Silence serves as a shield that non-victims can use to dissociate from the consequences of evil and the consequent perpetuation of suffering because these people do not have to expressly engage with those suffering, nor do they have to confront their own potential role in fighting evil. Rejecting accountability, those who respond with silence remain passive and removed. The decision to remain mute leads to emotional absence and represents the ignoring or neglect of victims whose suffering calls on people who learn about it or encounter it to speak against it.

In a similar vein, this failure of those responding to participate in post-tragedy dialogue neglects any duty to expose and condemn evil in a preventative measure against its repetition. Within his discussion of the adverse effects of neutrality, Wiesel also vowed “never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation” because “silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”⁴⁸ Remaining silent rather than speaking out

⁴⁸ Wiesel, “Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech.”

against the infliction of suffering—not engaging in or offering any thoughts against the evil—abets the evildoer at the expense of the afflicted.

In addition to denouncing indifference, Niemöller’s “First They Came...” poem also condemns silence. It addresses the various harmful results of untimely silence: the abandonment of suffering victims, the detachment of people responding, and the abetting of perpetrators of horrific evils. While this poem needs to be read in its proper context—evils such as mass shootings, although a danger in contemporary society, are not the Holocaust—it represents a powerful indictment of silence. It is a compelling appeal to all people who directly or indirectly encounter evil and suffering to refuse to remain silent in the face of injustice—even, and especially, when that injustice is perpetrated against others. Untimely silence prepares the way for further injustice, yielding to evil in its apathy and passivity.

By employing both “I” and “they” language, this poem addresses the alienation experienced by victims because of the harmful detachment of people who respond with silence, and it demonstrates the consequent perpetuation and intensification of the evil causing more and more victims to suffer. The poem indicts the person in a position to respond for thoughtless and inactive silence. The explicit “they” of the perpetrators and the implicit “they” of the victims permits “me” to justify passivity through the supposed distance between them and me. By repeating the personal pronoun “I” rather than employing a more inclusive “we” in which the individual may hide indistinct and unaccountable within the collective, the narrator condemns the individual who, although capable of resisting evil and standing up for the persecuted, refuses to accept any responsibility for doing so. Although I can speak out, I remain silent, unanswerable to the crimes I have yet only impersonally encountered and not directly experienced—at least for the moment.

This temporary luxury of neglect, however, only lasts until they come for “me,” and then I can only expect silence in response to my plight because I myself had left the suffering victims alone in their pain and distress. When I was not one of the victims, I maintained that distinction as a justification for silence, and my complacency failed to stymie the evil that eventually spread to encompass me as well. As I abandoned victims and detached myself from a plight not mine, I failed to provide any obstruction, no matter how seemingly small, to the evil that has now reached me as well, and the vicious cycle continues endlessly through harmful silence. The perspective of this poem, therefore, demonstrates the danger of remaining silent in response to evil and suffering.

Inattentive silence, therefore, proves destructive in the aftermath of evil and suffering because it represents a passive response which only perpetuates and never (re)solves any crisis. A result of untimely and uncompassionate silence, the self-imposed solitude of responders imposes painful solitude upon consequently helpless and hopeless victims, and in addition to failing to aid and alleviate the suffering of victims, the distant responder also neglects to confront the evil that could—and virtually inevitably will—recur because it avoids the exposure of verbal resistance. Apathetic and undiscerning silence represents an insensitive and counterproductive response to evil and suffering because it forsakes victims and only emboldens evildoers, and it consequently helps indicate that thoughtlessness proves exceedingly harmful in the aftermath of tragedy.

c. Selfishness

In addition to indifference and untimely silence, selfishness similarly reveals the unproductive effects of a failure to actively think in intentional response to the causes and effects of evil. Selfishness also causes people to withdraw from the possible and necessary answerability

to the evil perpetrated by others as well as from the claims that the suffering of others could make upon them. Focusing primarily on themselves, selfish individuals disregard others, subordinating the needs of helpless victims to personal desires in order to remain comfortably unfettered from the inconvenient demands of a crisis afflicting somebody else. In the face of evil and suffering, this selfishness manifests at the expense of current and future victims. Selfishness after evil and in the midst of suffering leads to a lack of empathy towards victims as well as a refusal to accept any burden or sacrifice that would help end or mitigate the evil and suffering. Selfishness not only achieves nothing in response to evil and suffering, it actually hinders and prevents possible (re)solutions to the problem.

Selfishness leads to a lack of empathy for victims. An exclusive concern for oneself leads to a disconnection from and subsequent disregard of other human beings. In “Selfishness, Self-Love, and Self-Interest” in *Man for Himself*, twentieth-century philosopher, psychologist, and sociologist Erich Fromm writes that selfishness, although not synonymous with self-love, “obviously excludes any genuine concern for *others*.”⁴⁹ The selfish individual “is interested only in himself....He can see nothing but himself.”⁵⁰ Selfishness does not necessarily prevent the pretense of concern, but feigned sincerity ultimately falls flat because it cannot establish true recognition of another person or the acknowledgment of his or her needs. With such blindness towards the reality of others, the withdrawn selfish person “is basically unable to love.”⁵¹

Similarly, “A Model of Consolation” found that “the self-centred [sic] person is not available” for communion with others and thus remains focused on and enclosed within the “I”

⁴⁹ Erich Fromm, “Selfishness, Self-Love, and Self-Interest” in *Man For Himself* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD, 1949), 130, emphasis added.

⁵⁰ Fromm, “Selfishness,” 130.

⁵¹ Fromm, “Selfishness,” 130.

at the expense of the “Thou” whose “presence” and “being” go wholly unacknowledged.⁵²

Because of a devotion to the needs and desires of oneself, the selfish individual cannot feel or express any genuine care or attention towards anybody outside of his or her own personal interests. Selfishness prevents consideration of others and thus rejects any empathetic connection. The thoughtless and thus unavailable person cannot and/or will not maintain the open presence necessary to recognize the presence and the need of another, and without intentional thought, communion thus becomes an impossibility because of the selfishness that results.

When driven by selfishness, individuals, therefore, find genuine love of others, find empathy, virtually impossible. Suffering, however, amplifies this inability to love and makes empathy, even when it is most needed, even more unlikely in the selfish witness. Passionately protesting and lamenting the horrific suffering which suffuses this world, Ivan Karamazov laments, “If we’re to come to love a man, the man himself should stay hidden, because as soon as he shows his face—love vanishes....It’s possible to love one’s neighbor abstractly, and even occasionally from a distance, but hardly ever up close.”⁵³ As soon as the un-sanitized need of another inconveniently and uncomfortably imposes itself upon a selfish person who would much prefer to—and who can—avoid it, that person finds it more difficult, even impossible, to truly express intentional and genuine love for the victim.

The deformity of suffering, its unsightly nature, causes the selfish individual to close himself or herself to this reality and instead withdraw rather than express empathetic concern and aid for a neighbor undergoing suffering. A selfish individual, confronted with real suffering, will find it impossible to express empathy for the victim because empathy requires that the responder

⁵² Norberg, et al., “A Model of Consolation,” 551.

⁵³ Fyodor Dostoevsky, “Rebellion” in *The Brothers Karamazov* (The Russian Messenger, 1880), 237.

accept the suffering victim as a neighbor, but the selfish person's inability to love others makes it virtually impossible to do so. Because of this inability to love, the selfish individual responds with harmful inattention to the suffering neighbor, refusing to truly help the victim because such help requires too much discomforting closeness, too much troublesome and disturbing acknowledgement of the needs of another outside of the personal desires of the individual responding. Refusing to truly think about the suffering encountered, the selfish individual guards against suffering in response to a victim's suffering and thus remains unempathetic in self-imposed removal.

In addition to and because of this aversion to any attempt at even approaching approximate understanding of a victim's suffering and to thus suffer in response to that suffering, selfishness also represents a harmful response to evil and suffering because it creates an unwillingness to incur any personal risk. The selfish individual remains reluctant to allow external claims to interrupt or threaten the individuality and integrity of his or her very self. In his analysis of selfishness, Fromm quotes German philosopher Max Stirner, who said that "love knows only sacrifice and demands self-sacrifice."⁵⁴ However, to the disadvantage of the victim, the selfish responder refuses to make any degree of self-sacrifice because of an inability to genuinely love others. Valuing personal security and convenience, the selfish individual, unable to feel or express true concern for another, responds harmfully to evil and suffering because of a refusal to think about others. Selfishness causes opposition to altruism and an unwillingness to submit to a cause outside and greater than oneself because such an external cause threatens to compromise the self that the selfish individual seeks to protect at all costs.

⁵⁴ Fromm, "Selfishness," 123.

In opposition to altruism, selfishness following evil and in the midst of suffering prioritizes the interests of the person who responds with selfishness rather than the needs of the victim. The selfish person considers and seeks personal welfare before or entirely in lieu of the general welfare or the welfare of a neighbor. Fromm notes the “egotistical, inconsiderate” nature of selfishness as well as its focus on the selfish person’s wishes to the exclusion or at the expense of the wishes of others.⁵⁵ Rejecting generosity in self-centeredness, the

selfish person is interested only in himself, wants everything for himself, feels no pleasure in giving, but only in taking. The world outside is looked at only from the standpoint of what he can get out of it; he lacks interest in the needs of others.⁵⁶

This lack of interest in others implies a passivity when confronted with the suffering of a victim who is not oneself. The selfish and thus disinterested and ungenerous person feels no impetus to extend a hand to those in need and indeed even feels an impulse in the opposite direction to withhold any help. The selfish individual, therefore, remains unhelpful due to an unwillingness to offer, to sacrifice, any part of himself or herself to help satisfy the needs of another.

In addition to rejecting altruism that could help alleviate suffering, this objection to incurring or offering any form of self-sacrifice to aid a victim whom the selfish person cannot genuinely love also leads to a refusal to engage in preventative measures against future repetition of evil. The selfish individual does not dedicate himself or herself to an outside cause that would make cumbersome demands on his or her time and energy and variously call for both physical and emotional commitment. Fromm describes the popular understanding of selflessness as a command to “submit yourself to something more important than yourself, to an outside power or

⁵⁵ Fromm, “Selfishness,” 126-127.

⁵⁶ Fromm, “Selfishness,” 130.

its internalization, ‘duty.’”⁵⁷ Of course, such submission requires a recognition of something outside of the self to which an individual should submit as well as a willingness to do so.

Although Fromm qualifies such a command by claiming a conjunctive rather than a contradictory relationship between selflessness and self-interest (selflessness does not require a complete *lack* of self), the implications of this general understanding of selflessness reveal that the opposite *selfish* individual refuses to commit either externally or internally to a higher cause than the personal self.⁵⁸ To the selfish person, no cause could be higher than the personal cause of maintaining a secure distance from the sacrifices outside forces and duties call upon those who obey them to make. As such, the selfish individual refuses to fight against evil out of fear of incurring personal risk and loss, and selfishness, therefore, prevents responses to evil and suffering rather than compelling the individual to respond by actively seeking to prevent further evil and suffering. Participating in preventative measures would necessitate personal sacrifices which the selfish person cannot abide.

Selfishness, therefore, represents a harmful response to evil and suffering that results when an individual refuses to think about others. The thoughtlessness of selfishness leads to an exclusive concern for the self at the expense of any regard for other human beings and the reality of their needs that the individual could otherwise, sans selfishness, potentially meet. The selfish individual will not or cannot love or empathize with suffering victims and, therefore, remains unaffected by their very real needs. These needs, consequently, remain unmet. Moreover, the person responding with selfishness rejects any form of self-sacrifice and thus views the claims of the suffering of another as inconvenient and even threatening, and this selfish responder also refuses to participate in the fight against evil because it could compromise personal security. In

⁵⁷ Fromm, “Selfishness,” 127.

⁵⁸ Fromm, “Selfishness,” 128-129.

the aftermath of tragedy, the response of selfishness thus counterproductively exacerbates the crisis and the pain it inflicts.

Worse than Nothing

Protesting the multitudes' failure to think, Arendt condemns the "nonwicked everybody who has no special motives and for this reason is capable of *infinite* evil."⁵⁹ A failure to think—and the subsequent failure to act constructively in response to the moral impulse of which the non-thinking person fails to become conscious—has the potential to permit and even cause "*infinite* evil."⁶⁰ As such, thinking and praying (and offering thoughts and prayers) are not worth "less than nothing" because the failure or refusal to think and pray produces fundamentally deleterious effects.⁶¹ Harmful thoughtlessness, through unwitting negligence or intentional disregard, only leads to a continuation and an increase of evil and suffering. Thoughtlessness induces indifference, untimely silence, and selfishness, which cause real harm to suffering victims.

Remaining indifferent, silent, and self-absorbed leads to harm in the aftermath of evil and suffering. These alternatives to thoughts and prayers only perpetuate the status quo or further deteriorate the crisis at hand because thoughtlessness obstructs compassion and constructive action. These alternatives involve an absence of compassion for others and an inability or unwillingness to fight against the evil inflicting suffering upon innocent human beings who are left ignored and abandoned. When a person able to respond to the needs of victims instead remains indifferent, silent, and selfish, suffering persists and evil prevails.

⁵⁹ Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 188.

⁶⁰ Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 188.

⁶¹ Jeselnik, *Thoughts and Prayers*.

Thoughtlessness thus represents a harmful response to evil and suffering that only perpetuates and exacerbates both. As the following discussion will demonstrate, remaining indifferent, silent, and selfish because of a lack of sincere thought obstructs the provision of aid and the effectuation of real change, but the opposite reaction of thoughts and prayers contrastingly enables the compassion necessary to console victims and to actually accomplish much more than nothing in response to both moral and natural evil and the suffering such evil so cruelly inflicts.

II. Thoughtfulness

As opposed to these harmful responses to evil and suffering, thoughts and prayers represent an important and practical response that actively works to meet the needs of victims and to counter evil. When genuinely performed, when offered sincerely, thoughts and prayers are worth much more than nothing because they provide necessary compassion and sympathy—absent which indifference, untimely silence, and selfishness counterproductively surface. To respond to evil and suffering by thinking and praying means to respond with empathetic consideration that generates sympathetic action. The active thoughtfulness of offering thoughts and prayers ensures the constructive responses of attention, timely silence, and selflessness, each of which signals the compassion critical to responding to suffering.

However, before discussing each of these necessary components of genuine thoughts and prayers, it is necessary to examine the relationship between thinking as analyzed by Arendt in “Thinking and Moral Considerations” and the thinking and praying offered in the aftermath of such evil as mass shootings. Attention, timely silence, and selflessness manifest as the consoling effects of thinking and praying, whereas the more concrete effects of thoughtful action will be discussed in Part III as the productive alternative to thoughtless harmful action. Although

offering thoughts and prayers is related to the thinking delineated in “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” it differs precisely because *offering* extends thinking into the relationship between responders and victims, thus providing it another ethical dimension.

Arendt notes that thinking “leaves nothing so tangible behind” because it “deals with invisibles and is itself invisible.”⁶² Distinguishing between thought and action, Arendt explains that “thinking’s chief characteristic is that it interrupts all doing, all ordinary activities no matter what they happen to be” because the thinking individual removes himself or herself from the object of thought to engage with it with intention and sincerity.⁶³ Only after thinking has taken place can the “judging of particulars” make thinking more tangible and visible; judging “realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances, where I am never alone and always much too busy to be able to think.”⁶⁴ The sincere offering of thoughts and prayers presumes that both thinking and judging occur. Those who extend thoughts and prayers to victims suffering in the wake of evil make themselves accountable both to the act of thinking which generates necessary compassion and also to the subsequent translation of intangible thoughts into more visible and tangible consolation and actions that may help enact positive change. Consolation will be treated here as a product of the compassion generated by sincere thoughtfulness, while the enactment positive change through concrete action will be the focus of the analysis of thoughtful action in Part III.

Consolation represents a positive response to evil and suffering because it represents active thoughtfulness. A consequence of Arendt’s notion of thinking followed by judging, consolation may manifest as an affective effect of thinking and praying and then offering

⁶² Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 163, 189.

⁶³ Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 163, 189.

⁶⁴ Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 163, 189.

thoughts and prayers to victims. On the boundary of thinking and acting and needing both to various degrees, the offering of thoughts and prayers involves an interaction, whether direct or indirect, between a person responding to evil and suffering and the victim. The person thoughtfully responding recognizes, acknowledges, and supports the victim by consciously and intentionally considering the evil and suffering and working to combat it with a compassionate “being with” the victim and a decisive “being against” the evil perpetrated. This affirmative response of consoling thoughts and prayers entails attention, timely silence, and selflessness, which all serve as necessary combatants against evil and suffering. Each of these components of the offering of thoughts and prayers will be examined in turn to designate this compassionate response as both meaningful and valuable.

a. Attention

Opposite indifference, sincere thinking about evil and suffering captures the attention of the person thus responding and causes that person to attend to the needs of the victims as well as to the problem of the evil perpetrated. Attention, the willful and purposeful focusing of the mind on a subject or idea of interest and import, in the aftermath of evil involves the thinking responder carefully observing and consciously considering the horror and its aftermath and then extending that attention to the victims by considering and attending to their needs through the compassion that the attention generates. Unlike the ignorance, detachment, and neutrality that harmfully follow indifference, thoughtful attention creates awareness that motivates people to feel empathy and compassion towards those suffering and to take a principled and pronounced stand against evil.

Truly thinking about a mass shooting requires undivided attention in which the person responding intentionally concentrates on and considers the causes and effects of the horrific act

of evil. This attention involves Arendt's notion of thinking. The thinking person gives such exclusive attention to the object of thought that "we stop everything else" and "it is as though we moved into a different world...outside the world of appearances."⁶⁵ Arendt's delineation of thinking encompasses the idea of attention and of the ignorance it resists. Such exclusive and conscious observation and consideration inevitably leads to a deeper perception and greater awareness of the object of thought—which in the case of mass shootings is the evildoer who unjustly and cruelly robbed innocent humans of life, as well as the murdered and living victims and their loved ones whose lives have been irrevocably altered for the unimaginable worse.

Such awareness not only counteracts ignorance but also goes beyond mere knowledge to an understanding that stimulates the otherwise inactive and indifferent conscience of the thinking individual. Attention or thought leads to understanding, which then generates the conscience necessary to convert thought into action. Drawing on Immanuel Kant to distinguish between knowing and thinking, Arendt comments on the distinction "between reason, the urge to think and understand and the intellect, which desires and is capable of certain, verifiable knowledge."⁶⁶ Although knowledge necessarily accompanies understanding, the thinking individual exercises reason in an effort to approach genuine understanding of the evil and suffering sincerely considered—although never *fully* realizing such understanding because of the only partially bridgeable gap between indirect or direct witnesses and victims and perpetrators due to the ultimate inaccessibility of their inner thoughts. Attention, therefore, provides the means for acquiring as much understanding as possible.

As this understanding develops, so does the conscience of the thinking individual. Attending to such evil and suffering through conscious thought rather than thoughtless

⁶⁵ Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 165.

⁶⁶ Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 163.

indifference generates demands upon the conscience because the approximate understanding achieved makes the thinker aware of the true horror and urgency of the situation and the need to respond to it. Conscience “is a form of self-reflection on and judgment about whether one’s acts are obligatory or prohibited, right or wrong, good or bad. It is an internal sanction that comes into play through *critical reflection*.”⁶⁷ That conscience—good or bad—helps develop moral character within the critically reflecting or thinking individual responding to evil and suffering, and that moral impulse primes this individual for accepting personal responsibility for then sharing thought as a precursor to converting thought into action. The intentional attention of the thinking person, therefore, staves off the ignorance appended to indifference because it generates awareness and understanding through critical reflection, and that understanding arouses the moral impulse necessary for motivating the responder to combat evil and suffering.

For example, the moral impulse stimulated by attentive thinking involves a compassionate “attending to” victims that deliberately rejects the detachment that characterizes the indifferent. In *Attending Children: A Doctor’s Education*, Dr. Margaret E. Mohrmann details the transformative experiences she encountered during her time as a pediatrician. She describes the act of attending in part as “to listen or pay attention to” and “to wait upon (as a servant), be present at or accompany.”⁶⁸ The not only professional but also moral obligation of attending to patients “is a matter not only of listening but of being with them, of accompanying them—children and parents—through all the twists and turns along the paths of devastating illness and loss or transformed survival.”⁶⁹ Although the nature of such natural evil as illness differs from

⁶⁷ Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 5th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 38.

⁶⁸ Margaret E. Mohrmann, M.D., *Attending Children: A Doctor’s Education* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 8.

⁶⁹ Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 13.

the human-caused evil of mass shootings, this response of attending as a “being with” those suffering proves equally important in both cases. This “being with” involves accompanying the victims “as guide, companion, assistant, or witness,” according to the needs of the person suffering.⁷⁰ Rather than remain aloof and distant, the attentive responder maintains an emotional and, if possible, physical presence and involvement in order to engage with and to aid the people undergoing suffering.

Rejecting detachment and absence, this attention through thinking and the subsequent attending through the offering of thoughts signals empathy within the responder for the suffering victim, and such thoughtful attention ensures that the victim does not feel utterly abandoned and alone in pain and despair. Mohrmann affirms the importance of empathy to attend to those suffering, and she encourages “the urge to enter into—by listening, paying attention, being present—a patient’s experience of suffering.”⁷¹ However, she also cautions against the very real “potential for misuse” of this “complex concept” of empathy by warning,

The risk of misuse comes with the medical professional’s assessment that, once having grasped something of the patient’s truth, there is no more to know and thus steps can be taken based on one’s (necessarily partial) understanding rather than on the explicit directions of the patient.

The truth is that no matter how intimate the bond I have with a patient, no matter how skilled I may become at seeing through my patient’s eyes and entering into his or her experience of suffering, I am still a separate person....It is my interpretive mechanisms that are processing what I see when I try to look at events from the patient’s point of view.

That is, it is one thing to be able, after careful listening and observation, to say, “I understand what you’ve let me know about how you feel,” and to let that understanding deepen and guide one’s relationship with the patient from then on....However, it is quite another thing, a dangerous and fundamentally immoral move, to proceed from such an understanding, important as it is, to the claim “I know how you feel.”⁷²

⁷⁰ Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 13.

⁷¹ Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 156.

⁷² Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 156-157.

The indirect or direct witness—the person who becomes aware of the suffering of others but who does not personally or directly suffer as a result of the evil experienced—must always remember that the suffering will never be fully accessible except to the person undergoing it. However, with this qualification always in mind, empathy nonetheless remains a critical response to the suffering of another because it has the potential to narrow the gap between the responder and the sufferer as much as possible in order to alleviate the solitude of suffering.

Offering thoughts represents one form of empathy because it involves expressing love and compassion for the suffering victim. This love and compassion counters how indifference “reduces the other to an abstraction” because genuine thinking, sincerely directing attention towards the suffering victim, involves treating the victim as a real person undergoing very real pain and despair.⁷³ A compassionate person engages with a victim through “attentive presence, compassionate attendance, and receptive attention,” and that attention involves expressing emotional empathy in order to be truly present with the suffering victim to the greatest extent possible.⁷⁴ Attention and attending involve honestly observing, concentrating upon, and developing concern for the suffering of another, and the sharing of the thoughts thus produced represents a necessary response to that suffering because it proves receptive to the observed needs of the victim. Without offering those thoughts—without extending that compassionate attention—the person tasked with responding causes the victim to feel ignored and unloved and to suffer even more.

Giving attention to the victims of mass shootings by offering thoughts thus proves a positive response to evil and suffering opposite the harmful response of indifference and consequent detachment because attention involves accompanying victims and being present in

⁷³ Wiesel, “The Perils of Indifference.”

⁷⁴ Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 15.

and receptive to their pain and despair. Attention involves approximating understanding and developing necessary empathy for those suffering, and this leads the thinking individual to attend to the victim with compassion by recognizing the victim, acknowledging the suffering being undergone, and then not leaving the victim utterly alone in that pain and despair.

In addition to encouraging attentive thoughts as a positive response of empathy and compassion, the moral impulse stimulated by attentive thinking also addresses the evil perpetrated. Thinking people do not offer thoughts *for* the perpetrator—although religious prayers do often call for the evildoer to recognize his or her act as evil and to repent of it. Rather, responders offer thoughts *about* the perpetrator and the crime that he or she committed. The responder contemplates the evil with attention that will not mitigate its horrors but will instead realize and expose their true extent. People giving attention to the crime and its perpetrator become personally aware of, and can then respond to, the evil. Enabling a recognition of evil as evil, this attention subsequently disillusion witnesses otherwise secure in the willful blindness of inattentive negligence and disinterest, which allows them to remain distant and impartial.

By actually thinking about and giving the act of evil deliberate attention, the person responding naturally yet sincerely grapples with its causes and its aftermath. Such intentional confrontation precludes the neutrality of indifference and instead necessitates explicit condemnation. When people truly consider and attend to an evil and the suffering it causes, they are unlikely to remain neutral and more likely to take a stand against it. Continued neutrality often indicates a lack of attention. Attention awakens the moral impulse and demands active participation and passionate interference to prevent a repetition of this evil.

Although a clear path to preventing mass shootings does not yet exist, a clear line does exist between good and evil with regard to the occurrence of mass shootings. Everyone

(excepting the evil few) condemns mass shootings, even if disagreement remains as to how to stop them, and deliberate attention, intentional thinking about, this evil amplifies that condemnation and helps clarify and advance the need for (re)solutions. Sharing that condemnation, *offering* thoughts, proves essential to motivating concrete action against it, action that would erroneously seem unnecessary in an inattentive and neutral populace that fails to recognize and acknowledge evil.

In his testimony *Survival in Auschwitz*, Holocaust survivor Primo Levi provides another example—perhaps the most poignant and tragic—of the helpful compassion of attentive thoughtfulness. While Levi worked in the concentration camp, a civilian outside the prison named Lorenzo delivered concrete aid to Levi in terms of food and supplies. Levi writes, “I believe that it was really due to Lorenzo that I am alive today.”⁷⁵ Lorenzo’s support, however, far surpassed the needs he fulfilled by material aid. Levi believes that Lorenzo preserved his life

Not so much for his material aid, as for his having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that there still existed a just world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole, not corrupt, not savage, extraneous to hatred and terror; something difficult to define, a remote possibility of good, but for which it was worth surviving.⁷⁶

The selfless attention Lorenzo voluntarily gave to Levi reminded Levi of the good and humanity that still existed despite the evil and insanity of the world in which he was held captive. Lorenzo could have remained indifferent to Levi’s suffering, but instead he made a conscious decision to be present with and for Levi. In doing so, Lorenzo showed compassion towards Levi and saved his life through his attentive presence and good nature.

The offering of thoughts and prayers, therefore, involves responsive attention that then stimulates other attentive responses to evil and suffering. When a person sincerely performs

⁷⁵ Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 121.

⁷⁶ Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 121.

thinking as prescribed by Arendt, this attentive person rejects the ignorance of indifference and instead develops understanding, which awakens an internal moral impulse to combat evil and reduce suffering. This arousal of the conscience leads to attending to both the suffering victim and the evil perpetrated. With regard to the former, the witness refuses to remain distant from the situation and instead offers consoling thoughts to the victims out of compassion and empathy. With regard to the latter, the witness rejects neutrality and instead offers thoughts as an express condemnation of the evil perpetrated. The offering of thoughts and prayers, therefore, represents an important response to evil and suffering because of the attention and attending they require and the consolation they provide when offered sincerely.

b. Timely Silence

In addition to attention, timely silence represents another way in which thoughts and prayers prove a positive and worthwhile response to evil and suffering, specifically with regard to mass shootings. As discussed above, untimely silence proves counterproductive and insensitive due to the failure to console victims desiring such consolation, the evasion of any moral responsibility by the restrained and uninvolved responders, and the refusal to expose and condemn the evil committed. However, because silence per se does not manifest as universally moral or immoral, timely silence serves as a productive and sensitive response necessary to both react to and help prevent mass shootings. When deliberately timed in a manner sympathetic to the victims inevitably most affected by this silence, saying nothing and instead compassionately offering attentive thoughts and prayers could be the response most needed.

Perhaps the oldest recorded example of responsive and moral silence can be found in the Book of Job in the Hebrew Bible wisdom literature. A work of Hebrew poetry addressing the problem of theodicy, the Book of Job also demonstrates how to respond to intense suffering. Job

undergoes immense loss. The Sabeans slaughter his servants.⁷⁷ Fire burns his sheep and his servants.⁷⁸ The Chaldeans abscond with his camels and slaughter more of his servants. A house collapses on his seven sons and three daughters, killing every one of them.⁷⁹ And Job himself is then afflicted with sores. Job loses virtually everything—his wealth, health, servants, and children—unexpectedly and inexplicably, and although he refuses to curse God, he nonetheless questions His justice. Although the poem relays an encounter between the Satan and God in which God authorizes the Satan to wreak havoc on Job’s life, Job is not privy to that conversation and is left wondering why a blameless and upright man would face such destruction.

Job remains unaware of the permission God gives the Satan to render Job utterly destitute and despairing. The loss Job undergoes manifests as both natural evil—the fire burning his livestock and servants, the wind causing a house to collapse on his children, and the illness afflicting his flesh—and also human-caused evil—neighboring peoples killing his servants and stealing his camels. The book affirms the ultimate inability of humans to understand such natural and human-caused evil because humans like Job lack the divine wisdom and omnipotence of God, who “laid the earth’s foundation” absent the help of created humanity.⁸⁰ However, although the poem responds to the question of theodicy, the “why?” behind evil and suffering, precisely by not answering it and instead by stating that finite humans can find or understand no such definitive reason, the Book of Job nonetheless provides a less ambiguous commentary on *how*

⁷⁷ *The Harper Collins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version*, Harold W. Attridge, ed., et al. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006), Job 1:15.

⁷⁸ Job 1:16

⁷⁹ Job 1:18-19

⁸⁰ Job 39:4

humans should *respond* to natural and human-caused evil and the resulting suffering. Among such prescriptions is silence.

After Job loses his wealth, health, servants, and children, his friends Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite hear “of all these troubles that had come upon him,” and they set out together “to go and console and comfort him.”⁸¹ However, once they recognize Job and realize (without fully grasping) the enormity of his troubles and sorrows, they “[sit] with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.”⁸² Their first reaction is one of mourning, expressed in weeping and silence as they see Job experiencing immense suffering in silence. Seeing Job overwhelmed with his troubles and sitting in silence, they react to that silence by accompanying him in that silence.

The silence of Job’s friends proves responsive to Job’s suffering because it mirrors the silence of Job. In the *immediate* aftermath of the evil that afflicts and devastates Job, Job exhibits signs of mourning—tearing his robe, shaving his head, worshiping, and sitting among the ashes—and then falls silent in his grief and despair.⁸³ His friends, upon witnessing his suffering and his response to it, themselves respond by mirroring Job’s reaction. They similarly weep and tear their robes and then, just like Job although experiencing reactive and sympathetic rather than direct pain, they fall silent.⁸⁴ For a full week, “no one said a word to him, *because* they saw how great his suffering was.”⁸⁵ Explicitly because of the intensity of Job’s suffering, his friends find silence to be the most appropriate response in the midst of Job’s recently experienced evil and

⁸¹ Job 1:1-2:12

⁸² Job 2:12-2:13

⁸³ Job 2:8

⁸⁴ Job 2:11-13

⁸⁵ Job 2:13, emphasis added.

his ongoing suffering. These witnesses encounter a silent Job and emulate that silence as a compassionate and sympathetic recognition, acknowledgment, and response to his suffering.

Further demonstrating the intentional timeliness and thus genuine responsiveness of this silence, the friends wait for Job to break the silence. They do not force the victim to respond how they would have him respond; they follow Job's lead rather than imposing their expectations upon him. They do not speak before Job, the victim, first expresses a desire to speak and a need for a response. The friends remain silent until Job "first opened his mouth," and they listen silently to Job's lamentations prior to verbally replying—albeit verbally replying with irresponsible and incorrect justifications for his suffering.⁸⁶ Their silence, therefore, responds attentively to the silence of Job by reflecting rather than dictating how Job may grapple with his own suffering. Saying nothing may thus represent an attentive response to the needs of the victim because it mirrors the victim's own response.

This responsive silence is not vacuous. Lack of speech does not inherently imply lack of thought. Rather, silence provides the necessary mental space for attentive thought and the empathetic and compassionate offering of that thought to the victim in order to acknowledge and hopefully ease the pain. Silence allows people to consider and learn how best to respond once the due time for silence has ended. The thoughtful responder must recognize "the importance of silence and space for contemplation" of the victim's needs and how best to attend to them.⁸⁷ Thoughtful silence well-timed in the immediacy of the suffering proves sensitive because it represents compassion for and companionship with the victim, and it also proves productive because it comforts and consoles.

⁸⁶ Job 3:1

⁸⁷ Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 15.

In his friends' silence, Job may perceive their sympathy, pity, and reactive grief because their silence represents a mourning *with* Job. The friends, through their silence, acknowledge and contemplate Job's suffering, and they commune with the victim through the "openness, presence and availability" necessary for consolation.⁸⁸ Through silence, Job's friends sit genuinely *with* him as he suffers, and they suffer—albeit differently—in response. Rather than apathetically ignoring Job and leaving him alone and forsaken without help or hope, the timely and attentive silence of the friends signals comfort, support, and sincere engagement because it provides the means for a genuine "being with" Job. Although the friends cannot experience or fully understand Job's pain, their commiserating silent sitting with Job provides consolation because it confirms for Job that he has not been neglected and utterly abandoned despite the solitude inherent in suffering. Job does not mourn alone, and the companionship in silence—the awareness that Job has of his friends' presence and their thinking about and with him—helps console and comfort him. Timely and attentive or thoughtful silence offered to a victim thus proves responsive to the suffering because of its potential for consolation.

Moreover, thinking with the victim in silence rather than immediately speaking about the evil and suffering further proves significant and responsive because it acknowledges the full reality and extent of Job's suffering by refusing to circumscribe it within the limits of language. Thoughtful silence in this instance attends to the victim without ignoring, dismissing, or reducing the magnitude of his pain and distress. Rather than immediately and unduly diminishing his suffering through finite words to something explainable and more manageable (although they admittedly later erroneously attempt to do so by speculating on justifications for Job's suffering), the friends instead initially respond to Job's immeasurable suffering with silence that does not

⁸⁸ Norberg, et al., "A Model of Consolation," 548.

inordinately or negligently reduce the degree of suffering as speech might in that instant. Indeed, God later critiques the friends for “obscur[ing] [his] plans with words without knowledge.”

Articulating inexpressible suffering in limiting and inaccurate words confines and misrepresents that suffering and thus endangers a recognition of its true intensity. The inexpressible nature of suffering, therefore, sometimes necessitates offering thoughts rather than words, and the consequent silence thus acknowledges the undistorted reality of that suffering and allows for the contemplation of accurate responses to it.

The Book of Job, therefore, provides a prime example of the kind of silence necessary in response to suffering. Demonstrating how best to respond to suffering, this book reveals the importance of silence before speech, as well as the potential insensitivity involved in presumptuous and limiting speech. Silent witnesses react in a sensitive manner to the needs of a victim still in the thrall of overwhelming suffering because they mirror the victim rather than dictating and imposing their expectations of how the victim “should” respond. A timely silence represents a consoling presence and opens the mental space for attentive thinking. Furthermore, the Book of Job reveals that timely silence in the immediate aftermath of suffering, far from prohibiting speech altogether, actually provides the occasion to prepare for speech through the attentive thinking possible only in the midst of silence—although as demonstrated by the critiques of the friends’ speeches, even thoughtful silence cannot guarantee successful subsequent responses. As revealed in the Book of Job, timely silence thus proves necessary for sincerely thinking and offering compassionate thoughts in a sensitive and productive manner.

However, the importance of the silence needed for thinking and for offering thoughts in the aftermath of evil goes beyond the interaction between Job and his friends. While this encounter testifies to how to respond to a suffering individual in a sympathetic manner, it does

not address why silent thinking rather than direct speech could be beneficial and effective in response to the *evil* of mass shootings. The silence of thinking and the lack of speech associated with sharing thoughts is necessarily geared toward meeting the needs of the victim through consolation and connection, but prudent silence and judicious speech also actively help combat evil and prevent mass shootings.

When speaking up becomes necessary, people aware of evil and suffering should—as a matter of morality, not legal proscription—continue to observe select silence to limit the amount of publicity tragically yet inevitably afforded the perpetrator of crimes such as mass shootings. The media coverage facilitated by a global and digital age counterproductively gives the mass shooter exactly what he craved: recognition and fame, or, more accurately, notoriety and infamy. His face, name, and message extend beyond what he alone could achieve, and this serves to motivate future perpetrators who desire such publicity. Intentional silence thus becomes critical in the effort to deny these evil perpetrators the desired ends of their crimes. Acknowledging this common trend among mass shooters by commenting on the mass shooting at Nakhon Ratchasima’s Terminal 21 mall in Thailand, Anchalee Kongrut observes that “overnight” a man previously indistinguishable in a crowd “became a world-famous mass murderer” because “all celebs—be they good or bad—are given a moniker.”⁸⁹ Silence in this instance, not repeating the shooter’s name or sharing his photograph, proves responsive because it denies “mass killers the fame and recognition they crave.”⁹⁰

Furthermore, such a denial through omission actually helps prevent mass shootings. Studies show that sensationalized media coverage inspires copycat killers. The 2015 study

⁸⁹ Anchalee Kongrut, “For Me, Mass Killer Will Never Have a Name,” *Bangkok Post*, Opinion Column (12 February 2020).

⁹⁰ Kongrut, “Never Have a Name.”

“Contagion in Mass Killings and School Shootings” found “significant evidence of contagion in mass killings and mass shootings,” and media publicity represents one factor in that contagion.⁹¹ Revising this idea of contagion by instead analyzing “generalized imitation,” the 2017 study “Mass Shootings: The Role of the Media in Promoting Generalized Imitation” concluded that media can directly influence imitation by “repeatedly present[ing] the shooter’s image, manifesto, and life story and the details of the event,” which serves as a model for imitators.⁹²

The 2017 study does not suggest eliminating coverage altogether, but it does suggest how to amend such coverage in an effort to mitigate its harmful effects. For example, it endorses the “Don’t Name Them” campaign of the Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training Team, which seeks to minimize the negative effects of media attention by advocating strategic silence.⁹³ Other strategies include “avoid[ing] in-depth descriptions of the shooter’s rationale,” reducing coverage duration, limiting live coverage, and avoiding speculation and extensive (and consequently excessive) detail.⁹⁴ Strategic and consequently thoughtful silence in the aftermath of a mass shooting thus proves critical for preventing evil because it refuses to provide mass shooters with the publicity that they and their successors crave.

The timely silence of offering thoughts and prayers, therefore, represents both a sensitive and a productive response that valuably contributes to addressing both evil and suffering. With regard to the latter, in the immediate aftermath of evil, the silence of responders provides the mental space for attentive thinking and also makes them compassionately present and available to a victim who would otherwise feel utterly alienated. Offering thoughts rather than speaking

⁹¹ Sherry Towers, Andres Gomez-Lievano, Maryam Khan, Anuj Mubayi, and Carlos Castillo-Chavez, “Contagion in Mass Killings and School Shootings,” *PLoS One*, vol. 10(7) (July 2, 2015).

⁹² James N. Meindl and Jonathan W. Ivy, “Mass Shootings: The Role of the Media in Promoting Generalized Imitation,” *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 107(3) (March 2017), 368-370.

⁹³ Meindl and Ivy, “Mass Shootings.”

⁹⁴ Meindl and Ivy, “Mass Shootings.”

into the silence allows the people responding and the victims to grieve—albeit differently—together, and through silent thinking the people responding assure the victim that they have not abandoned the victim in despair. Focusing on sharing contemplation and reflection with the victim and other responders rather than on speaking imprudently about the evil helps prevent future repetition because it emphasizes the horrific nature of the crime and devalues the infamy of its perpetrator.

c. Selflessness

The sincere offering of thoughts and prayers—as opposed to the dishonest offering by selfish “people who see something horrible happen in the world and...run to the Internet” to be seen and publicly perceived as considerate—as a response to evil and suffering necessitates *selflessness*.⁹⁵ The harmful response of selfishness rejects empathy, concern, and care for others because the selfish individual cannot love the suffering victim and remains blind and callous to the victim’s needs. The selfish person, disinclined to risk and sacrifice, rejects personal discomfort or disruption and remains distant from those suffering, and selfishness makes this person unwilling to engage in the moral battle against the evildoer. Reversing this harmful response with compassionate consideration, offering thoughts and prayers involves a selflessness through which the person responding to evil and suffering intentionally prioritizes the needs of others over personal concerns or desires.

Focusing on others rather than his or her own self (although not completely abandoning a sense of self), the unselfish person assumes a humility that regards and values victims with concern for their welfare. Thoughts and prayers, when offered sincerely, require this selflessness that awakens and instills responsive compassion for others within people who could otherwise

⁹⁵ Jeselnik, *Thoughts and Prayers*.

quite easily remain inward-focused and withdrawn. Facilitating such an orientation towards others, the selflessness involved in offering genuine thoughts and prayers for another person—rather than for egotistical publicity, which only projects a disingenuous façade of concern not actually felt—proves a necessary response of compassion. The selfless thinking about evil and suffering allows for the empathetic opening of the selfless individual to respond with sympathy and love towards suffering victims even though such concerns involve personal risks and sacrifices. This selflessness both reacts to and helps prevent evil and suffering in an indispensable orientation toward the victim and against the perpetrator.

The selflessness involved in offering thoughts and prayers orients the responder toward the victim. It does so first by encouraging the selfless individual to voluntarily work towards genuine awareness and consideration of the suffering of another and then, as a result of this empathetic suffering, causing this individual to meet the needs of the victim through sympathy and human connectivity. The first step of selfless responsiveness towards suffering others through thinking about their suffering involves an intentionality that rejects blindness and recognizes and acknowledges the sheer reality of their pain and despair. This selfless thinking represents a willingness to risk personal contentment and convenience through the voluntary assumption (not, however, with an eye towards heroism and self-aggrandizing “virtue”) of suffering in response to suffering directly or indirectly witnessed, not directly or forcibly experienced.

In the essay “Useless Suffering” on the phenomenology of suffering and the end of theodicy, French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas articulates this ethic related to selflessness by stating that “the suffering of suffering, the suffering for the useless suffering of the other, the just suffering in me for the unjustifiable suffering of the other, opens suffering to the ethical

perspective of the inter-human.”⁹⁶ With this dynamic of suffering, selflessness trumps selfishness and operates within this inter-human order. The selfless individual does not remain withdrawn and impervious to pain, and the suffering victim does not suffer utterly alone. Overcoming self-serving interests as well as a natural aversion to self-effacing sacrifice, which places others’ needs first, genuine thinking about the suffering of another consists of the selfless choice to purposely open oneself up to empathetic suffering as a result of encountering, acknowledging, and responding to another’s suffering by deliberately undergoing personal suffering. The selfless responder casts off self-protection and considers the suffering of another with such attentive thought that the responder assumes responsive empathetic suffering.

Mohrmann expresses a similar idea in *Attending Children*. She notes the necessity of not remaining selfishly closed to all disagreeable or distressing feeling when encountering the suffering of another. She “survived—more than that, thrived on—the pain of being present for such heartbreaking events by being truly present and allowing [her] heart to *be* broken” and by “being there fully, experiencing the awfulness directly without shielding [herself] by leaving (physically, mentally, or emotionally).”⁹⁷ As described by both Levinas and Mohrmann, this deliberate openness to heartbreak, to intense internal suffering, reflects the selflessness of thoughts and prayers. To truly think and pray about the suffering of another involves a selfless presence and openness that invites feelings of pain and despair into the intentionally vulnerable witness. The direct or indirect witness has the freedom and ability to remain impregnable to another’s suffering, but selflessly thinking and praying about the real, really experienced suffering of another human being means to compromise and cast off the previously impenetrable

⁹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshaw (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 94.

⁹⁷ Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 92.

personal shield against suffering and to instead consciously and willingly invite such suffering in, allowing it to move and generate responsive feeling.

However, this suffering assumed by the selflessly thinking individual is not a carbon copy of the suffering undergone by the person directly victimized by the evil perpetrated. A person responding to evil does not undergo the same pain as the direct victims of it. Though inherently related, the two experiences of suffering remain distinguishable. Levinas continues by clarifying,

In this perspective there is a radical difference between *the suffering in the other*, where it is unforgivable to *me*, solicits me and calls me, and suffering *in me*, my own experience of suffering, whose constitutional or congenital uselessness can take on a meaning, the only one of which suffering is capable, in becoming a suffering for the suffering (inexorable though it may be) of someone else.

The responsive selfless suffering of the person thoughtfully responding inevitably proves different from the direct suffering of the victim to which this person is responding.

Mohrmann concurs with this idea that the separate experiences of direct or indirect witnesses and victims ensure different perspectives and feelings of pain, and a recognition of that difference is essential for responding to the specific needs of a victim. She asserts the falsity of the claim “I know how you feel,” declaring it “a dangerous and fundamentally immoral move”⁹⁸ because only the sufferer knows his or her own suffering, even if the witness suffers in response. Rather, suffering in response to the suffering of another reinforces this difference of experience while also permitting the witness to empathetically respond. Discussing her response to the loss of two children, Mohrmann stated that not “shielding” herself

gives [her] both clarity about who is actually suffering this terrible loss—the parents, in ways I can neither imagine nor vicariously undergo and to a degree that puts my sense of loss in appropriate perspective—and the opportunity to acknowledge and experience my own legitimate emotions.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 157.

⁹⁹ Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 92.

She thus rejects any leveling erasure between the two and acknowledges both as distinct. The witness suffers differently because the witness suffers responsively rather than directly.

However, precisely because the suffering of a victim and the selfless suffering of the thinking and praying responder do not manifest as carbon copies, that selfless suffering can then become useful and productive in alleviating suffering and preventing further evil. In “Theodicy, Useless Suffering, and Compassionate Asymmetry: Primo Levi, Emmanuel Levinas, and Anti-Theodicy,” Jennifer Geddes expounds on Levinas’ “Useless Suffering” and posits that “Levinas’ insistence on an asymmetry in relation to the usefulness of suffering—that is, the other’s suffering can never be useful to me, but my suffering in response to her suffering can become useful—may be helpful” in defining how a person should respond to suffering.¹⁰⁰ The sufferings differ, and the witness can only deem his or her own suffering useful.

This usefulness comes through the selfless compassion the responsive suffering both expresses and generates. The “proper response to the extreme suffering of others is compassion, a suffering in response to others’ suffering,” and this response “is the basis for the interhuman order in which we are linked to each other in asymmetrical calls of help and responses of aid that are outside the logic of commerce, reciprocity, and expectations of return.”¹⁰¹ This selfless suffering and consequent compassion recognize that “the other’s call of help requires my assistance *without thought of reciprocation*,” without thought of selfish gain.¹⁰² The unique suffering incurred by selfless thinking proves helpful because it manifests differently and because, as a consequence of this difference, it generates compassion that operates within an

¹⁰⁰ Jennifer L. Geddes, “Theodicy, Useless Suffering, and Compassionate Asymmetry: Primo Levi, Emmanuel Levinas, and Anti-Theodicy,” *Religions* 2018, 9(4), doi:10.3390/rel9040114, 6.

¹⁰¹ Geddes, “Theodicy, Useless Suffering, and Compassionate Asymmetry,” 2, 5.

¹⁰² Geddes, “Theodicy, Useless Suffering, and Compassionate Asymmetry,” 5, emphasis added.

interhuman order that does not leave the victim unconsidered, uncared for, and unloved. This suffering of the selflessly thinking responder leads to love and concern for the suffering other—an absolutely essential extension of feeling to not leave the victim ignored and alone.

Not only does this selflessly thinking, and thus suffering, witness love as a result of this response to others' suffering, but this openness to suffering allows the witness to love the victim even better than would otherwise be possible. For Mohrmann, the opening of the heart to brokenness through the consideration of the suffering of another leads to an enhanced capacity to respond because “the heart that can break, again and again, in the face of such suffering and grief becomes softer, more resilient, more capacious.”¹⁰³ Rather than the vicious cycles that perpetuate the thoughtlessness of indifference, untimely silence, and selfishness, this positive and productive cycle of thoughtful selflessness regularly increases compassion and care in response to the suffering of others such that those others feel noticed and loved.

Mohrmann, along with Lois Shepherd, encapsulates the necessity of selflessly assuming suffering through responsive thinking. She does so by communicating the idea of welcome. Listening “attentively, empathically, mindfully” and selflessly opening oneself to suffering in response to another's suffering involves “the concept of *welcome*,” which “signifies an orientation toward the other that involves an utter and complete willingness to let another person...into our consciousness, our gaze, our care, our lives, even if only temporarily.”¹⁰⁴ This welcome “allows the truly capacious attention and openness to the other that is essential for appropriate, compassionate medical care,” and, I would add, care in general.¹⁰⁵ Opposite the

¹⁰³ Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 92.

¹⁰⁴ Margaret E. Mohrmann, MD, PhD, and Lois Shepherd, JD, “Ready to Listen: Why Welcome Matters,” *Humanities: Art, Language, and Spirituality in Health Care*, in *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*, vol. 43, No. 3, March 2012, 647, 648.

¹⁰⁵ Mohrmann and Shepherd, “Ready to Listen,” 650.

exclusive taking of selfishness, selflessness knows only sacrificial and generous giving, and it facilitates compassion that seeks to care for those who need support and encouragement.

In addition to demonstrating the attention of thoughtfulness, Levi's encounter with Lorenzo as recounted in *Survival in Auschwitz* also further demonstrates the productive compassion of selfless thoughtfulness. Levi remarks that those in the concentration camp were "the untouchables to the civilians," who occasionally threw a scrap of bread in part to selfishly "get rid of some importunate starved look" or receive entertainment from watching "us running from all sides to fight each other for the scrap."¹⁰⁶ Lorenzo, however, was different. Levi writes,

In concrete terms it amounts to little: an Italian civilian worker brought me a piece of bread and the remainder of his ration every day for six months; he gave me a vest of his, full of patches; he wrote a postcard on my behalf to Italy and brought me the reply. For all this he neither asked nor accepted any reward, because he was good and simple and did not think that one did good for a reward.¹⁰⁷

Although Lorenzo doubtlessly had a limited supply of rations, he nonetheless spared some to aid Levi. He did so not for selfish gain or promotion but simply to show goodness and to meet Levi's needs to the best of his ability in this miserable situation. His selfless thoughtfulness provided aid and comfort to Levi when Levi was utterly surrounded by terror and evil.

In a later 1959 interview, Levi elaborated on his encounter with Lorenzo's attentive selflessness. He revealed, "We almost never spoke. He was a silent man. He refused my thanks. He almost didn't reply to my words. He just shrugged: Take the bread, take the sugar. Keep silent, you don't need to speak."¹⁰⁸ Continuing, Levi stated, "He asked me once in very laconic words: Why are we in the world if not to help each other?"¹⁰⁹ Lorenzo generously and selflessly

¹⁰⁶ Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 120-121.

¹⁰⁷ Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 119.

¹⁰⁸ Primo Levi, interviewed by Gabriel Motola, "Primo Levi, The Art of Fiction No. 140," *The Paris Review*, Issue 134, Spring 1995.

¹⁰⁹ Levi and Motola, "The Art of Fiction."

aided Levi both with his material goods and even more so with his general goodness and presence. His compassion proved invaluable to Levi amidst the evil of Auschwitz.

Selflessness, therefore, proves an essential component of genuine thoughts and prayers, and through this selflessness—as well as through accompanying attention and timely silence—thoughts and prayers represent an important response towards victims in the aftermath of evil. By consciously and intentionally thinking and praying for and about a suffering victim, the selfless responder adopts an openness and permits a consequent vulnerability that causes this direct or indirect witness to acknowledge the suffering of another and to feel pain in response. This responsive pain both demonstrates and generates love and compassion, which alleviate or help the otherwise alienated victim endure emotional and mental despair while also providing a catalyst for the provision of further material acts of compassion. Thoughts and prayers, therefore, prove responsive to suffering because they involve a selflessness that ensures and fosters concern for those in need.

More than Nothing

When offered with attention, timely silence, and selflessness, thoughts and prayers, therefore, combat thoughtlessness and represent a response of compassionate consolation in the aftermath of evil. Attention forestalls indifference by instead forcing the responder to consciously and willingly contemplate the evil and its resultant carnage and to then sympathetically attend to the victims' needs and explicitly condemn the evil perpetrated. Timely silence involves a simultaneously sensitive and productive process of listening and learning while being with—both emotionally and, if possible, physically—those suffering unimaginable pain without imposing expectations upon how these victims “should” undergo suffering. Selflessness counters the unavailability and distance of selfish individuals unwilling to risk any

personal sacrifices by instead encouraging an openness and self-effacing presence that acknowledges and feels in response to the pain of others.

Each of these three elements of offering genuine thoughts and prayers—attention, timely silence, and selflessness—suppresses its corresponding harmful alternative, and all three coalesce to make the offering of thoughts and prayers important following evil due to the compassionate consolation they provide to the recipient of the thoughts and prayers. To ensure the sincerity of thoughts and prayers and to thus affirm the indispensability of offering them, *all* three must simultaneously constitute the thoughts and prayers offered. If all three are present and made known and accessible to the victims, thoughts and prayers prove responsive and, therefore, meaningful and productive. Thoughts and prayers thus offered extend empathy and compassion to victims absent which those suffering would have to bear and endure their suffering utterly alone, and they serve as an unequivocal condemnation of the evil committed absent which the status quo would continue or its deterioration would ensue. The help and hope provided by the sincere offering of authentic thoughts and prayers represents a valuable response of active thoughtfulness in the aftermath of evil because that offering brings compassion and consolation.

III. Thoughtful Action Versus Thoughtless Action

As discussed above, Hannah Arendt concludes “Thinking and Moral Considerations” by noting the interrelation between thinking and “the faculty of judging particulars.”¹¹⁰ For Arendt, “judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances.”¹¹¹ Thinking precedes and underlies judging. When a person thinks, consciousness internalizes and affects the conscience and then that conscience externalizes as

¹¹⁰ Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 189.

¹¹¹ Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 189.

consciousness through judging.¹¹² When a person does not think, however, the interconnection between conscience and consciousness, between thinking and judging, remains suspended and severed. Translating this connectedness onto the relationship between thought and action as described in this thesis entails recognizing the distinction between thought and action, or the alternatives of thoughtlessness and inaction, as well as how each inevitably affects the other. Thinking stimulates and informs action. Accordingly, *not* thinking suppresses and distorts action.

In addition to this defense of thoughts and prayers on the grounds that sincerely attentive, timely, and selfless thoughts and prayers prevent thoughtless indifference, untimely silence, and selfishness, the reductive and restrictive binary between thoughts and prayers, on the one hand, and action, on the other, also blinds people to the fact that thoughts and prayers must accompany action in order to prevent thoughtless inaction as well as thoughtless action that does more harm than good. Productive responses to evil and suffering involve *thoughtful action*. Thought informs the action people must take to compassionately and productively respond to suffering.

Thoughtful action replaces the alternative of thoughtless (in)action; thoughtful action proves helpful in response to evil while thoughtless (in)action proves harmful. Because the preceding sections focused on thoughtless inaction, the following section will analyze harmful thoughtless action before turning to the meaningful and useful response of thoughtful action.

A lack of sincere thoughts and prayers in the aftermath of tragedy leads to ineffective and damaging thoughtless inaction and thoughtless action. As discussed above, thoughtless inaction most often results from general thoughtlessness because thoughtlessness fails to provide the moral impetus necessary to motivate a person to respond to the evil and suffering witnessed. Doing nothing is the most common consequence of thoughtlessness. However, thoughtlessness

¹¹² Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 189.

may also lead to even worse harm when linked with action. In response to evil and suffering, if a person decides to just “do something,” that something, if done thoughtlessly, could be even more harmful than doing nothing at all. Thoughtless action routinely does more harm than good, and even the limited good it could potentially produce proves unintentional and, therefore, incidental. The discussion to follow will demonstrate that thoughtless action proves the inefficacy and destructiveness of thoughtlessness.

Alternatively, sincere thinking and praying lead to positive and productive action that responds constructively to evil and suffering. Thinking precedes and lays the strongest foundation for the most productive action post-tragedy, and it continues to inform that action as the thinking responder performs it. Although good may accidentally result from thoughtless action and although thoughtful action cannot entirely guarantee good results, genuine thoughtfulness—attentive, timely, and selfless thinking—helps guide the process of response towards the best possible choice (of the choices available and perceived) and reduces the risk of responding harmfully or inadequately. The following analysis will contrast the harmful ramifications of thoughtless action with the positive and valuable results of thoughtfulness.

Thoughtless Action

Thoughtless action often leads to more harm than would doing nothing at all. Although thoughtlessness most often leads to inaction, many people commit harmful acts without thought. In response to evil and suffering, the call to simply “do something” may misguidedly lead people to heedlessly do anything, without intentional regard as to whether or not the something done truly helps in the short and long terms or if it actually causes more harm than good. Although thoughtless action does not necessarily exclusively cause harm and although both help and harm may prove entirely incidental to a mindless act, the risk of harm proves far greater when a person

commits an act thoughtlessly because the thoughtless individual fails to carefully consider and give due regard to both the execution and potential consequences of the action. Without proper attention and reflection, the action will likely manifest as imprudent and undiscerning and will virtually always result in unintended, because un- and ill-considered, consequences.

Thoughtlessness combined with action thus threatens to cause harm through inadvertently counterproductive consequences. Without requisite mindfulness and consideration, an action may cause real damage. Responsive action, not good in and of itself, may prove counterproductive when accompanied by thoughtlessness. When a person responding to evil and suffering performs an act with any degree or combination of indifference, untimely silence, and/or selfishness, the witness is likely to impede the efficacy of that act. To demonstrate the risk involved in thoughtless action, the following analysis will examine the process and implications of rash and unmindful acts as seen in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and during Mohrmann's training and time as a pediatrician.

Although literary fiction, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* provides profound insight into the danger of thoughtless action, as the titular protagonist does much more than nothing—in creating life—but does so prior to true reflection. By endeavoring to endow an inanimate corpse with the spark of life, Victor Frankenstein acts primarily on knowledge rather than the reasoned understanding Arendt attributes to the authentic exercise of thought, and without sincere thought, the judgment or action that follows becomes distorted. Frankenstein, a man of “unbounded knowledge,” ardently seeks “the acquisition of knowledge,” and by his efforts he “set himself at the head of the university.”¹¹³ This knowledge, however, largely seems to fall within the Kantian

¹¹³ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, 1818, edited by J. Paul Hunter, Second Norton Critical Edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 17, 27, 43-44, 152.

form of knowledge distinguished from reason and Arendt's conception of thinking.¹¹⁴ As discussed above with regard to the attention of thought, Arendt distinguishes "between reason, the urge to think and understand and the intellect, which desires and is capable of certain, verifiable knowledge."¹¹⁵ While Frankenstein develops a sense of reason throughout the novel as partially self-imposed misfortunes afflict him and he gains the wisdom of hindsight, the initial "serpent" which stings him is knowledge—knowledge attained and exercised without adequate forethought.¹¹⁶ The knowledge he acts upon dooms him, with attentive thought and subsequent understanding coming retrospectively, much too late.

After he completes his project, Frankenstein remorsefully reflects on the initially unreflective process of his undertaking. Exercising his scientific knowledge by endowing a monstrously human frame with life, Frankenstein acts without sincere thought. He describes the total control his undertaking maintains over his mind. An initial "resistless, and almost frantic impulse, urged [him] forward" such that he "seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit," and throughout the duration of that pursuit, an "eagerness" which made him "insensible" to all else "had taken an irresistible hold of [his] imagination."¹¹⁷ However, in his later retrospective understanding, he comments critically about his demeanor and behavior during those days, stating that "a human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind" because the maintenance of such tranquility in all human pursuits throughout history would spare the world much, if not all, suffering.¹¹⁸ Recounting his life, Frankenstein thus too belatedly realizes the unreasoned passion, the "ardour that far exceeded moderation,"

¹¹⁴ Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 163.

¹¹⁵ Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 163.

¹¹⁶ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 17.

¹¹⁷ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 33-34.

¹¹⁸ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 34.

that distorted his mind and consequent acts.¹¹⁹ His pursuit of knowledge overpowers his mind, and it leads to his downfall because he imprudently acts on that knowledge unmindful of the potential negative consequences that could result.

Because Frankenstein relies solely on the acquisition and pursuit of knowledge, he acts on his “curiosity and lawless devices” and “thoughtlessly bestow[s]” life, and he then thoughtlessly responds to that life without serious consideration of the consequences.¹²⁰ Frankenstein never fully thinks through his actions and thus obstructs the development of a compassionate conscience that would help inform his actions in a productive manner. According to Arendt, conscience “is a form of self-reflection on and judgment about whether one’s acts are obligatory or prohibited, right or wrong, good or bad. It is an internal sanction that comes into play through critical reflection.”¹²¹ Describing this interrelation between thought and action and the activity of conscience, in *Forbidden Knowledge* Robert Shattuck quotes Hans Eichner stating, “He who acts is always without scruples; only he who contemplates has a conscience.”¹²² Failing to sincerely contemplate, Frankenstein pauses to consider how, but not whether, he should act on his knowledge, and he only expects positive results, never anticipating unintended negative consequences. His profound knowledge deludes him into believing that he thought through his action, but this self-deception only creates more unintended harm because it does not give him an opportunity to develop the requisite conscience to act upon in prevention of evil and suffering to come. His “sole purpose” is to create life, and he does not consider what that life will actually look like in form and function once created.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 36.

¹²⁰ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 54, 62.

¹²¹ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 38.

¹²² Robert Shattuck, “Faust and Frankenstein” in *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography* (San Diego: Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996), 103.

¹²³ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 35.

This pursuit, the process of creating life, demonstrates various aspects of thoughtlessness. For example, Frankenstein displays marked indifference towards the horror of his pursuit. Having to study death in order to create life, Frankenstein examines corpses at various stages in the process of physical degradation. However, unlike many people, he views the church-yard not as housing “supernatural horrors” but as “merely the receptacle of bodies deprived of life.”¹²⁴ Without horror, he investigates “the corruption of death.”¹²⁵ Such an unemotional, detached posture towards death allows him to discover the cause of life, and it proves a harbinger of the indifference that underlies his preparation of the body through grave-robbing. Furthermore, despite this proximity to death, he never once considers any negative ramifications of his pursuit. This un-mindfulness reveals his ignorant indifference toward the consequences of his action. If he had stopped even briefly to attend to the potential harm his action—and his uncompassionate reaction to the result of his action—would cause, perhaps he would never have followed through on the knowledge he possessed.

In addition to this indifference, Frankenstein’s pursuit involves selfishness. For example, this undertaking proves a “selfish pursuit” as Frankenstein later reflects that “study had before secluded [him] from the intercourse of [his] fellow-creatures,” and that largely self-regarding study involved creating and forsaking a living—a thinking and feeling—being.¹²⁶ Heedless of the impending reality of the independent life that would come at the conclusion of his thoughtless pursuit to act on his knowledge, Frankenstein entertains himself with selfish thoughts of his own glory: “A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me.”¹²⁷ This uncircumspect selfishness blinds

¹²⁴ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 31.

¹²⁵ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 31.

¹²⁶ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 45.

¹²⁷ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 33.

Frankenstein and causes him to think primarily about his own scientific and human achievement without regard for how such a creation would affect others—save the later scientific community that would applaud his efforts and build on his foundation—including the Creature himself. He remains blind to the unreality of his quixotic vision until the creature's opened eye opens his own eye to the result of his experiment.¹²⁸ In “selfish frenzy” he exults in the power he has discovered and acts to establish this knowledge in real life, but when he finishes, he immediately abandons his creation out of personal shock and horror.¹²⁹ The selfishness driving Frankenstein imposes harmful solitude on an innocent being because Frankenstein refuses to selflessly perform his duties as creator even though he voluntarily chose to create independent life.

The unintended consequences that result from his thoughtless action to create life and then immediately abandon the unforeseen monster cause immense harm to himself and others. With regard to the unintended harm he inflicts on others and brings upon himself as a result of his mindlessness and negligence, Frankenstein undergoes immense suffering at the hands of his creation because of his lack of thoughtful compassion. He immediately abandons the creature and spurns and disregards his duty as creator once his perception of the monstrous creature shatters his prior quixotic vision. That abandonment and neglect cause him to fall from happiness to wretchedness as he incurs the initially just wrath of his Creature: “No creature had ever been so miserable as I was; so frightful an event is single in the history of man.”¹³⁰ If Frankenstein had exercised thoughtful compassion towards his Creature, perhaps the necessarily “bad conscience” that plagued him with regret and remorse would instead have reversed and changed his misfortunes to fortunes.¹³¹

¹²⁸ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 33-36.

¹²⁹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 31-33.

¹³⁰ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 142.

¹³¹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 132.

Frankenstein's selfish pursuit also leads to severe consequences for others. Many innocent victims suffer and die at the hands of Frankenstein's creation because Frankenstein refuses to show compassion towards the Monster alive solely because of Frankenstein's action. Frankenstein unthinkingly creates life and then unleashes immense horror on his innocent loved ones because he fails to perform his duties as creator. Two years pass before the murder of William, but in those two years, Frankenstein does not seek out and indeed purposely avoids the Creature. Those two years pass with Frankenstein seeking diversion and never considering his personal responsibility, and his avoidance of that responsibility leads to the deaths of innocent individuals. The unintended repercussions of Frankenstein's thoughtless activity manifest in full force particularly when his wife Elizabeth falls victim to his creation. Frankenstein never imagines that the Monster's promise to be with him on his wedding night would mean the death of his wife, so the precautions he takes involve preparing for his own death rather than hers.¹³² Innocents such as Elizabeth suffer fatal harm because Frankenstein's initial and subsequent thoughtless actions begin an avalanche of continuous unintended and unanticipated consequences. Frankenstein can create but not restore life, and his acts lead to irrevocable harm.

As mentioned above, Frankenstein's thoughtless undertaking and subsequent lack of conscience also harms the Creature because Frankenstein endows him with life and then fails to show him due compassion. Instead of responding with selfless attention, Frankenstein instead flees "the wretch" as soon as he opens his eyes and thus disillusiones Frankenstein's glorious vision with his living "demoniacal corpse."¹³³ Previously indifferent to death, Frankenstein becomes extremely aware of the disproportionate and monstrous corpse unnaturally awakened to life. Only after two years do "curiosity and compassion" convince him to listen to the Creature's

¹³² Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 121.

¹³³ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 36.

tale, but his compassion vanishes when he looks upon his hideous form, “the filthy mass that moved and talked” and which causes Frankenstein’s “feelings” of compassion to be “altered to those of horror and hatred.”¹³⁴ Frankenstein cannot bring himself to accept responsibility as creator and have care and concern for his creation, so he leaves the monster an outcast deprived of all companionship. Frankenstein’s negligence and selfish horror—his mistaken actions resulting from lack of contemplation—inflict real suffering upon an initially wholly innocent creature unduly consigned to utter solitude.

In hindsight, Frankenstein’s experience with evil and suffering teaches him “how dangerous is the acquisition of knowledge.”¹³⁵ His cry to the magistrate after he relays his tale discloses the warning Frankenstein wishes he had considered before he acted on his knowledge: “‘Man,’ I cried, ‘how ignorant art thou in thy pride of wisdom!’”¹³⁶ The unreflective ignorance and selfish pride upon which Frankenstein acts bring catastrophic repercussions and wreak havoc on himself, his Creature, and his innocent loved ones. By the end of his tragic life, Frankenstein has gained understanding and conscience, but at the highest cost of everything he loves and holds dear. Although he creates life, his heedlessness in doing so leads only to despair and death.

Apart from recording his tale (via Robert Walton) as a warning to others who would so thoughtlessly act upon knowledge rather than tranquil reason and understanding, Frankenstein has achieved worse than nothing. His endeavors torment his abandoned and consequently fallen Creature, end the lives of innocent people, and do not even achieve his initial goal of laying a scientific foundation for posterity.¹³⁷ His experience teaches him to keep such knowledge secret.

¹³⁴ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 103.

¹³⁵ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 32.

¹³⁶ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 144.

¹³⁷ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 159.

He laments and warns against the “senseless curiosity” that led to his miseries.¹³⁸ *Frankenstein*, therefore, epitomizes the danger of harmful thoughtless action. Frankenstein intended to act for goodness and glory, but his lack of true thought with regard to the consequences of and responsibility incurred by his action instead led only to his fall and to the harm of others.

Similar to Shelley but instead operating within the realm of nonfiction, Mohrmann also relays the potentially harmful nature and effects of thoughtless action. Mohrmann recounts the thoughtless activity that occurred during her care of Daniel, an infant who survived a miscarriage at roughly twenty-six weeks. In the effort (or lack thereof) to save Daniel, Mohrmann notes, “I could, in fact, determine life or death through just the sort of uninformed and insufficiently analyzed moral decision that I was taking upon myself in this situation.”¹³⁹ Power of life and death, in many ways analogous to the power held by Frankenstein, afforded enormous weight to Mohrmann’s decisions and not insignificant responsibility for the outcomes of those decisions. Distinguishing between knowledge and reason or understanding, she acknowledges that further instruction in medical school would not have availed her in the case of Daniel. When faced with such moral dilemmas as how best to care for patients like Daniel, she realizes that

I am not sure that the addition of instruction in bioethics to medical school curricula in the years since then has done much to alter that discrepancy. It is one thing to teach modes of analyzing and resolving identified bioethical dilemmas; it is quite another to form reflective physicians, able and willing to recognize and address with compassion, humility, and discretion the moral questions that arise continually in the day-to-day care of vulnerable persons.¹⁴⁰

In the field, Mohrmann learned from experience to think through her actions, and only then could she act with “compassion, humility, and discretion.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 151.

¹³⁹ Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 47.

¹⁴⁰ Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 47.

¹⁴¹ Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 47.

The initial efforts to save Daniel involved thoughtless activity on the part of the doctors involved. Mohrmann received a “semi-urgent” call to help Daniel.¹⁴² These doctors told her “don’t rush” because “they did not expect the baby to survive” but “thought it would be politic to have a pediatrician pronounce the child officially ‘unsalvageable.’”¹⁴³ These doctors went through the required motions, but they held misguided assumptions that risked the life of the specific infant in front of them who, contrary to their general expectations, survived and continued to develop as a healthy baby would. These doctors acted unreflectively on their preconceived assumptions as to Daniel’s survivability, and they failed to attend to his particular needs. A greater sense of urgency and hope could have been acted upon if these doctors had more carefully considered and attended to Daniel’s needs.

Mohrmann acted upon her “automatic rescue reflexes” to save Daniel.¹⁴⁴ However, she decided “if he made it, fine; if not, not. But no ‘heroics,’” and she “continued to be pessimistic” towards the situation, not expecting Daniel to survive.¹⁴⁵ She became aware of her negligence when a resident asked, “What else does he have to do to prove to you he’s worth treating? Have you looked at *him*, at Daniel, these past few days, or just at your own assumptions about him?”¹⁴⁶ That question awakened Mohrmann to the humanity and individuality of Daniel, and her newfound compassion changed her response. She learned through experiences like this one to consider each individual she treated as a human with an identity and personality and deserving of her utmost concern and care. This awareness helped save Daniel’s life, whereas her previous acting with presumption could have caused irrevocable harm.

¹⁴² Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 43.

¹⁴³ Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 43.

¹⁴⁴ Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 45.

¹⁴⁵ Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 46.

¹⁴⁶ Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 47.

Another pertinent incident of thoughtless activity recounted by Mohrmann occurred after the death of an eight-month-old boy named Rashad. With his death imminent, Mohrmann approached his mother and “asked if she would give permission for an autopsy.”¹⁴⁷ Mohrmann comments retroactively, “God forgive me. What could I have been thinking?”¹⁴⁸ She had asked a question not intending to respond insensitively to the death of Rashad in the presence of his grieving mother, but she asked before the child had died and before the mother even knew he was about to die. Rather than maintain timely silence and prudent speech, she spoke words that, in that instant, should have been left unsaid, and she realized that with the clarity of hindsight.

Mohrmann’s encounters with Daniel and Rashad—as well as the countless other patients she treated—reveal the harm that unthinking acts can inflict, however unintentionally, and the understanding that comes with experience. Granted, no forethought can predict and anticipate all outcomes of an action, and learning comes with experience *if* thinking about that experience comes as well. Mohrmann subtitled her book *A Doctor’s Education* in acknowledgment of how her experience on the job taught her to think and become a more compassionate doctor. Reflecting on these experiences, she notes “the importance of silence and space for contemplation of what each patient requires for her or his healing and relief” as well as the necessity of “attentive presence, compassionate attendance, and receptive attention.”¹⁴⁹ In her educational shift from student to resident and doctor, she transitioned “from needing to know in order to *be* right to needing to know in order to *do* right,” and attentive contemplation provided her the opportunity to do so.¹⁵⁰ In this book, she recounts her many mistakes in her training

¹⁴⁷ Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 21.

¹⁴⁸ Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 21.

¹⁴⁹ Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 15.

¹⁵⁰ Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 17.

process as she learned how to think—as she learned how thought, informed by knowledge but guided by reason, should govern her actions within the real world rather than in a classroom.

Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Mohrmann's *Attending Children: A Doctor's Education*, therefore, reveal the potential dangers of acting without sincere thought. Just because Frankenstein and Mohrmann do something, that does not guarantee that that something will prove sensitive and useful. In many instances, doing nothing would indeed represent the better course of action because a thoughtful decision to do nothing may not carry with it the negative consequences of doing worse than nothing through harmful thoughtless activity. Action is not inherently productive. Thoughtless action often produces more harm than good because it obstructs the activity of a conscience. The alternative of thoughtful action must replace inattentive activity in order to increase the likelihood of good resulting from that action, and to such thoughtful action I now turn.

Thoughtful Action

Thoughtful action—action performed attentively, in a timely manner, and selflessly—represents the most compassionate and productive response in the aftermath of evil. Thinking proves an important precursor and guide to effective action. Thought both lays the foundation for and informs meaningful and constructive responses. Thought must accompany action, and vice versa, in order to most effectively combat evil and its consequences. Looking at Charlotte Delbo's "Prayer to the Living to Forgive Them for Being Alive" in *Auschwitz and After* and looking further at Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Mohrmann's *Attending Children*, this examination of thoughtful action will further deconstruct the binary between thought and action and defend the necessity of the former by detailing the useful interrelation of thought and action.

Many Holocaust testimonies—attempting to commit suffering to words so that others may learn and remember—demonstrate the danger of thoughtlessness. For example, in “Prayer to the Living to Forgive Them for Being Alive” in *Auschwitz and After*, Holocaust survivor Charlotte Delbo provides a vision of her post-Holocaust encounters with people who had the luxury, a luxury refused to victims, of forgetting the horrors witnessed or of never even learning of them. For people to remember requires a conscious decision, and by attempting to recount unimaginable experiences of suffering during the Holocaust in inevitably finite and circumscriptive language, Delbo entreats readers to make that conscious decision and to *act* on it “because it would be too senseless / after all / for so many to have died / while you live / *doing nothing* with your life.”¹⁵¹ Delbo condemns thoughtless inaction and thoughtless action by calling on witnesses—both contemporaneous with her writing and also future readers—to consciously act against evil in response to the suffering inflicted upon the victims of the Holocaust.

In this poem, Delbo observes passersby going about their lives unaware of the fact of life itself, while she, having undergone a living death, remains ever intensely aware of the life within her.¹⁵² She beseeches these passersby to do something meaningful with their lives; however, hopelessness and desperation tinge her plea as she sees “you who are passing by” increasingly unaware of the need to consciously act as time passes with them and, with time, memory. They pass her, and other victims, by, unaware of her past and continuing experience of pain, and they do not understand that they should intentionally do something to respond to that suffering.

¹⁵¹ Charlotte Delbo, “Prayer to the Living to Forgive Them for Being Alive,” *Auschwitz and After*, trans. Rosette C. Lamont (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 240, emphasis added.

¹⁵² Delbo, “Prayer to the Living,” 239.

Delbo implores passersby to act meaningfully, and to do so they must act intentionally and deliberately. These people pass by “full of tumultuous life,” full of an “excess of life” which prevents them from full awareness that they are alive, unlike the millions of victims murdered in the Holocaust.¹⁵³ As they go about their daily lives, Delbo exhorts them to “do something / learn a dance step / something to justify your existence / something that gives you the right / to be dressed in your skin in your body hair / learn to walk and to laugh.”¹⁵⁴ She calls upon all those passing by to become aware of the life within their limbs, and to attend to that life. She beseeches them to give attention to that life so that they may then act so as not to thoughtlessly waste something so precious and fleeting that millions have lost. Delbo connects thought and action by linking such attentive awareness of life with doing something to warrant that life, rather than mindlessly rendering it both meaningless and useless through inattentive and unintentional (in)activity.

Delbo does not stop there. After calling for this awareness and responsive activity, she provides a reason for doing so. She declares that “it would be too senseless / after all / for so many to have died / while you live / doing nothing with your life.”¹⁵⁵ Delbo places her call to attentive action within the interhuman ethical order. Her call to “do something” operates within the post-Holocaust world of response. Millions suffered unimaginable torment and millions died during the Holocaust, and it “would be too senseless” for all those who remain alive to simply forget, to move on, to no longer think about and respond to that evil and suffering.¹⁵⁶

By describing the thoughtless activity of the passersby as making the Holocaust victims’ suffering “senseless,” Delbo does not intend to imply that the deaths inflicted by the Nazi regime

¹⁵³ Delbo, “Prayer to the Living,” 239.

¹⁵⁴ Delbo, “Prayer to the Living,” 240.

¹⁵⁵ Delbo, “Prayer to the Living,” 240.

¹⁵⁶ Delbo, “Prayer to the Living,” 240.

could have any sense. Rather, Delbo implores those passing by to do something meaningful in response to and in further prevention of that meaningless death and destruction. Considering how theodicy immorally seeks to justify the useless suffering of others, Geddes proposes compassionate asymmetry, “that is, the other’s suffering can never be useful to me, but my suffering in response to her suffering can become useful.”¹⁵⁷ This compassionate asymmetry applied to those passing by in Delbo’s poem would require these passersby to pause and reflect such that they can suffer in response to the suffering of the Holocaust, and through the activity of deliberative conscience, that responsive suffering would generate compassion and would guide and compel those passing by to meaningful action. This would stave off the senselessness of the suffering and death of the Holocaust in the sense that deliberately responsive activity would become useful in alleviating ongoing suffering and preventing further destruction.

In this compassionate asymmetry, thought thus accompanies action. The thoughtful witness, the mindful passerby, attends selflessly to the suffering of Holocaust victims. The thoughtful individual acts meaningfully with compassion not to justify or give meaning to the victims’ suffering but to do something useful to respond to that suffering. Without thought, those passing by would never develop the necessary good conscience to respond compassionately without insensitively ascribing meaning to the victims’ suffering. Thought gives awareness and responsibility to the passersby to do something, but to do something thoughtfully.

Also exhibiting thoughtful action, Frankenstein experiences various moments of clarity of mind that compel him to extend compassion and direct his behavior to reflect that compassion. Upon seeing his Creature again after the death of William, Frankenstein initially spurns the “wretched devil” with overwhelming “anger and hatred” and expresses his contemptuous

¹⁵⁷ Geddes, “Theodicy, Useless Suffering, and Compassionate Asymmetry,” 6.

longing for “the extinction of [the Creature’s] miserable existence.”¹⁵⁸ Countering this “rage without bounds,” the Creature entreats Frankenstein to remain calm and repeatedly pleads with Frankenstein to “hear me” and “listen to my tale.”¹⁵⁹ Although initially overcome with such detestation that his passion confounds his rational mind, the act of thinking awakens Frankenstein’s conscience. Frankenstein follows his Creature silently while “weigh[ing] the various arguments that he had used, determined at least to listen to his tale. I was partly urged by curiosity, and compassion confirmed my resolution.”¹⁶⁰ Reasoned deliberation compels Frankenstein to act to fulfill his duty as a creator and listen to the being he endowed with life. He silently deliberates how to respond to the Creature’s request that Frankenstein hear his tale, and Frankenstein’s selfless duty—no matter how inconstant throughout his relations with the Monster—in this moment directs his attention towards compassionately listening.

Following the tale, however, Frankenstein’s reasoned compassion proves irregular and unreliable, and rage continues to consume him. When listening to the Creature’s words, Frankenstein “compassionated him, and sometimes felt a wish to console him.”¹⁶¹ Interfering with this compassion and the consolation that could result, at the sight of “the filthy mass that moved and talked [his] heart sickened, and [his] feelings were altered to those of horror and hatred.”¹⁶² However, Frankenstein reflects and decides to comply with the Creature’s demand that Frankenstein create a female companion for him. This war within Frankenstein between hate and compassion indicates how reasoned thought generates compassion while the hatred and rage overwhelm his mind and constrict his ability to discern the most effective course of action. At

¹⁵⁸ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 68-69.

¹⁵⁹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 69.

¹⁶⁰ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 69.

¹⁶¹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 100-103.

¹⁶² Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 103.

this point in the novel, Frankenstein resolves to act on his compassion when his thought edges out his hatred—although the following events in the novel reveal that even this decision to act was muddled by this inconsistent mix of impassioned detestation and thoughtful compassion.

Because of this ongoing conflict within Frankenstein between compassion and hatred, he arrives at a decisive turning point in the remote laboratory where he works to create a female companion for the Creature. Frankenstein thinks silently to himself, noting, “As I sat, a train of reflection occurred to me, which led me to consider the effects of what I was now doing....I was now about to form another being, of whose dispositions I was alike ignorant.”¹⁶³ Recognizing his own previous ignorance and lack of awareness, Frankenstein laments his former thoughtless action and wishes to correct and not repeat his prior mistakes. His reflection on the potential ramifications of his decision to create life continues, and he resolves never to repeat his experiment. Rather than continue to create “for [his] own benefit,” Frankenstein curses his own “selfishness [which] had not hesitated to buy its own peace at the price perhaps of the existence of the whole human race.”¹⁶⁴ Attentive thought in the silence of his remote laboratory convinces him to pursue the more selfless course of action and destroy his current project because he becomes aware of the potential consequences of his action and deems them not worth the risk.

It must also be noted, however, that these various thoughtful actions that Frankenstein pursues in response to his living Creature’s requests and actions derive from Frankenstein’s initial thoughtless act of creating and then abandoning life heedless of the potential ramifications of doing so. Because all of Frankenstein’s subsequent thoughtful actions develop as a result of this consequential thoughtlessness, these thoughtful actions fail to completely repair previous, or prevent further, harm. For example, although Frankenstein destroys the second creature at great

¹⁶³ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 118.

¹⁶⁴ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 119.

risk to himself yet to protect humanity, he nonetheless inflicts further harm upon the Creature and continues to neglect his duty as creator, and unintended and unanticipated consequences—particularly the death of his wife Elizabeth—still occur despite the fact that Frankenstein believes that his calculated decision to destroy the second creature is deliberated “as if a film had been taken from before [his] eyes, and that [he], for the first time, saw clearly.”¹⁶⁵ After his initial fall in creating and abandoning life, Frankenstein learns from his mistakes and attempts to think through and perform selfless actions to rectify those mistakes, but these actions never manifest perfectly because of the continuing ramifications of his previous thoughtless behavior.

As seen in the cases of Daniel and Rashad, Mohrmann also learned the importance of thoughtful action, which saved Daniel’s life and which would have been a more sensitive response to Rashad’s grieving mother. The other life-changing experiences that Mohrmann recounts reveal a similar process of becoming aware of and practicing attending, listening, and accompanying so as to best respond to the specific needs of individual patients. In particular, the encounter Mohrmann had with Mickey, the patient personally named in the dedication of this book, “is the grounding story of [her] career—perhaps of [her] adult life—and the one that encapsulates everything else [she] has to say.”¹⁶⁶ This encounter with Mickey demonstrates the exceedingly responsive care with which Mohrmann attended her patients.

Mickey, a twelve-year-old leukemia patient, made Mohrmann aware of the potential dehumanizing nature of the medical process as doctors frequently talk around and about, rather than to, patients. It dawned on Mohrmann that she had been “treating her as a patient-on-display and not as Mickey, the human being most intimately involved in the subject matter of the discussion,” especially when talking with Mickey’s family “*about* her, as though she were no

¹⁶⁵ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 122.

¹⁶⁶ Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 51.

longer part of the family.”¹⁶⁷ This understanding informed Mohrmann how best to care for Mickey. Acting out of compassion, Mohrmann worked to meet Mickey’s needs with concrete support, which included: not talking *about* Mickey within her view, honestly yet sensitively answering “The Question” about death, permitting her human contact by allowing her mother Mary to give her a kiss, and planning for Mickey to die outside of the P.I.C.U.—the P.I.C.U. being a “euphemism for death”—in as close to home as possible in her old decorated hospital room. Although Mohrmann could not ultimately save Mickey’s life, her compassionate care allowed her to consider and respond to Mickey’s needs and thus alleviate some of the suffering Mickey and her family endured. At this point in her career—although always learning—Mohrmann understood the importance of caring for patients with intentionality, and she attended to Mickey to minimize the pain the situation inflicted upon her. Thoughtful action eased some of the pain and made Mickey feel less alone in her suffering.

As demonstrated in Delbo’s “Prayer to the Living,” Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and Mohrmann’s *Attending Children*, thoughtful action most effectively responds to moral and natural evil and the suffering such evil inflicts. When attentive, timely, and selfless thoughtfulness informs action, compassionate and productive responses result because responders become aware of and voluntarily incur responsibility for acting, and they carefully consider the potential consequences of doing so. Thoughts and prayers, therefore, prove essential in the aftermath of tragedy because they occasion and guide the most effective action.

Concluding Remarks

On November 5, 2017, twenty-six innocent people were murdered and twenty others were injured at First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas. It was the deadliest mass

¹⁶⁷ Mohrmann, *Attending Children*, 65.

shooting in Texas history and the deadliest church shooting in modern American history. Far-resounding shock, horror, and grief quickly hit onlookers witnessing the immense suffering inflicted upon this religious community. Far-resounding in distance, however, not time, and though quickly, only briefly.

In its immediate aftermath, this shooting dominated the headlines—duly so—across local, state, national, and even international news. Headlines read: “La Vernia Community Mourns 26 Killed in Texas Church Shooting” (*KSAT San Antonio*), “Grandmother Died Shielding Grandson in Sutherland Springs Church Shooting” (*Dallas Morning News*), “A Texas School is Devastated by Church Shooting” (*Reuters*), “The Lives of the Texas Victims” (*Washington Post*), and so on.¹⁶⁸ As these headlines gradually fell out of the news, however, people who initially reacted with profound dismay consequently began to think less about the shooting, proving that trite yet well-founded proverb, “Out of sight, out of mind.” As the days and weeks progressed, initial concern gradually faded from the forefront of the minds of those not directly impacted by the evil perpetrated, as evinced by the decline in news coverage. Years later, these particular crises have been increasingly relegated to the past, overtaken by subsequent events and only occasionally granted further attention when new relevance surfaces.

However, as time passed, the victims’ pain did not disappear even though their living nightmare was dropped from the headlines. Their pain doubtlessly remains a daily reality after the evil that irrevocably altered their lives and the lives of those around them. Indeed, local and regional news stories—from outlets closest to the direct victims—survived the longest following this horror, but even these stories decreasingly make the front page headlines. More than two

¹⁶⁸ Patty Santos, “La Vernia Community Mourns 26 Killed in Texas Church Shooting,” *KSAT San Antonio* (November 7, 2017); Lisa Maria Garza and Jon Herskovitz, “A Texas School is Devastated by Church Shooting,” *Reuters* (November 8, 2017); “The Lives of the Texas Victims,” *Washington Post* (November 9, 2017).

years after Sutherland Springs, most news stories continuing to cover the shooting come from such outlets as the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, *KSAT San Antonio*, and the *Dallas Observer* rather than from national news organizations, and these stories cover the local recovery efforts such as memorials, increased security, and the building of a new church.¹⁶⁹ Sutherland Springs, therefore, followed a pattern similar to other mass shootings: initial sensation followed by a gradual decline in attention. The effects of shootings such as the one at Sutherland Springs do not cease with reduced coverage, but the number of people thinking about them with such righteous anger towards the evil and such zealous compassion towards the victims certainly decreases because people fail to continue thinking about the crisis—if indeed they ever truly thought about it at all. Local leaders continue to cry out, but the people who hear are fewer and farther between.

As the reach of the news dwindles, so does the reach of the victims' plight and the extent of the compassion and relief offered to them by people not directly affected, by onlookers who have the luxury of easy—and, more often than not, desired—escape by simply avoiding the news. Despite an initial and very natural response of shock and grief, direct and indirect witnesses to the horrors of mass shootings like Sutherland Springs gradually turn their attention, their thoughts, away. They do so in part to protect themselves because humans are confronted with more accounts of evil and suffering than we can possibly sincerely think about without pushing our minds and hearts to the point of collapse, but they also do so because of a need to move on to concerns that appear to them more urgent because more present and tangible in their

¹⁶⁹ Tessa Weinberg, "After Church Shooting, Texas AG Launches Resource Site for Volunteer Security Teams," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* (March 11, 2020); Erica Hernandez, "2 Years Later: Sutherland Springs Leaders Looking for Change," *KSAT San Antonio* (November 5, 2019); "18 Months After Shooting, Sutherland Springs Church to Unveil New Worship Center," *KSAT San Antonio* (May 19, 2019); Paige Skinner, "Following Church Shootings, North Texas Houses of Worship Look to Secure Their Doors," *Dallas Observer* (January 29, 2020).

own lives. Granted, they would not claim that the deadly shootings and their irreversible human causalities and consequences have lost any of the horror they initially felt, nor would they say that they have altogether forgotten it. Rather, they would acknowledge that they no longer think about the crisis with as much impassioned interest and must instead be reminded to feel empathy and express concern. Sutherland Springs gradually becomes a distant memory no longer occupying non-victims' thoughts, and unthinking people maintain no real interest or concern. This decline in attention raises the question of whether sincere thought ever truly pervaded the minds of witnesses, who no longer direct their actions to support victims either.

Thoughtless inattention leads to unconscionable harmful reactions in the aftermath of such incredibly deadly shootings as the one perpetrated in Sutherland Springs. People capable of responding instead remove themselves from the troublesome situation, and whatever initial responsiveness to the crisis existed consequently dissipates. Inattention blinds the unthinking responders to the true horror of twenty-six innocent, individual human beings who lost their lives at the hands of a murderous individual and the countless others injured and affected, and this blindness stymies an impetus to respond or undermines any un- or ill-considered response. Any sincere thought of the innocents dead at First Baptist Church, ranging from seventeen months old to seventy-seven years old and including a pregnant woman and her baby, would immediately extinguish any semblance of uncompassionate thoughtlessness or un- or counter-productive thoughtless action because such reactions leave victims unaided and inflict further harm.¹⁷⁰

Contrary to this harmful thoughtlessness and thoughtless activity, people attempting to meaningfully and productively respond to mass shootings, such as the one at Sutherland Springs, instead maintain thoughtfulness and perform thoughtful action. This thoughtfulness involves

¹⁷⁰ Jason Hanna and Holly Yan, "Sutherland Springs Church Shooting: What We Know," *CNN* (November 7, 2017).

practicing attention, timely silence, and selflessness in order to compassionately extend consolation to the victims. In turn, the most effective and considerate action ensues from this thoughtfulness and continues to be guided by it. The compassion generated by thoughtfulness motivates people to respond thoughtfully against evil and to aid victims by donating blood to victims; contributing to medical, funeral, and relief costs; assuming an unequivocal stand against the ideology behind such violence; or taking any other thoughtful actions. Such responsive thoughtfulness and thoughtful action console and aid victims.

Although in day-by-day, moment-by-moment decisions people rarely maintain *absolute* thoughtlessness or *complete* thoughtfulness, any degree of the former increases potential for harm while the latter to any extent increases the chance of benefit and help, and this becomes particularly true when either brings about inaction or action. When post-tragedy debate centers on whether thoughts and prayers *or* their supposed opposite action represents the most meaningful and effective response to horrific acts such as mass shootings, proponents of either side as well as advocates of both (who, although defending both, largely defend each side separately) fail to recognize that both thoughts and prayers *and* action prove far more preferable than the responses of inactive thoughtlessness and thoughtless action. As the contrasts between thoughtlessness and thoughtfulness as well as between thoughtless action and thoughtful action demonstrate, sincere thoughts and prayers are worth much more than nothing in response to evil and suffering.

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