

Ice Water Ethics

During the summer of 2014, the “Ice Bucket Challenge” went viral on social media sites and across the internet. The challenge consisted of dumping ice water on one’s head, posting a video of it, and daring others to either do the same or donate \$100 to the ALS Association. Among the millions of people who completed the challenge and posted their videos were dozens of celebrities, several of whom also made large donations. In a few months the phenomenon raised over \$100 million for research into ALS, a life-threatening neuron disease with no known cure.¹ On its face, the challenge was hugely successful, raising awareness and funding for an organization that is seen by charity watchdogs as efficient and well-run.¹

However, the challenge also drew heavy criticism. Some commentators labeled it “slacktivism,” pointing out that most people participating in the challenge made no contribution at all to ALS.² In addition, William MacAskill, Vice-President of Giving What We Can, argued that the challenge led to so-called “moral licensing.” This refers to the observation that people who feel that they have already done a good deed feel less obligated to do good in the future. “Because people on average are limited in how much they’re willing to donate to good causes,” he argued, “if someone donates \$100 to the ALS Association, he or she will likely donate less to other charities.”³ He later said that ALS, though harmful and tragic, is a problem that affects only a few thousand people every year.⁴ Third-world diseases like malaria, which affect millions of adults and children, can be easily prevented at relatively low cost. To extend the life of a very sick ALS patient by three months would cost approximately \$55,000, an amount that could instead save over a dozen children from malaria.⁵ Some extend this argument to claim that it is in fact unethical to donate to ALS rather than to a more effective cause.

Proponents counter that the Ice Bucket Challenge directly caused people to give money to the ALS Association that will prolong and improve the lives of thousands of ALS patients. At the same time, the event was considered great fun, and raised awareness of the disease. Moreover, proponents argue that, even if supporting the ALS Foundation does much less good than supporting, say, the Against Malaria Foundation, it also does much more good than many of the other things that people do with their time, energy, and money, such as have a nice dinner out or see a Broadway musical. Are we prepared to say that all of these actions are unethical – indeed, even more unethical than participating in the Ice Bucket Challenge – as well?

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Is it morally problematic if charitable donors believe they are doing more good than they actually are?
2. Is it unethical for a charity to solicit more donations than it needs, knowing that the extra money could be much better used elsewhere?
3. Is it unethical for an individual to donate to a charity knowing that the money could be much better used elsewhere?
4. How demanding is morality in general? For example, do we have a moral obligation not to spend \$100 on new clothes when we could be saving lives with that money instead? And, either way, what does that imply about the morality of our personal projects and relationships?

¹ <http://www.alsa.org/news/media/press-releases/ice-bucket-challenge-082914.html>

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ben-kosinski/icebucketchallenge-why-vo_b_5656649.html

³ <http://qz.com/249649/the-cold-hard-truth-about-the-ice-bucket-challenge/>

⁴ <http://qz.com/250845/this-week-lets-dump-a-few-ice-buckets-to-wipe-out-malaria-too/>

⁵ <http://www.givewell.org/international/top-charities/AMF#Whatdoyougetforyourdollar>

