

# Department of Public and Social Administration

## Postgraduate Work Display

Chan Hang Lap (MPhil)

### The Moral Difference between Acts and Omissions and Its Practical Implications

Let us consider Amelie's conducts in the following four pairs of cases and ask ourselves whether or not there is moral difference between those in each pair:

#### *i. Deep Water*

- (i) Amelie watches Mr. Stone drowning in front of her; she knows that she can save him, but she chooses not to. Soon, Mr. Stone drowns to death.
- (ii) Amelie pushes Mr. Stone into deep water and kills him.

#### *ii. Charity*

- (i) Amelie does not donate money to a charity fund; a poor child in a developing country suffering from famine dies as a result.
- (ii) Amelie sends poison to the above poor child and kills him.

#### *iii. Ambulance*

- (i) Amelie, a rescuer, leaves one injured person to die by the road when hurrying to the rescue of several, though she knows that there are no other people around who can save the injured person from death.
- (ii) Amelie, the rescuer, by ambulance, drives over a recumbent person (and kills him) in order to reach in time the several who are to be rescued.

#### *iv. Organ donation*

- (i) Under the Singaporean policy, unless a person has registered an objection, her kidney may be taken upon her death and transplanted to a patient in need. Amelie, a Singaporean, does not register the above objection.
- (ii) Under the Hong Kong policy, a person who wishes to donate her kidney upon her death has to sign an agreement beforehand. Amelie, a Hong Kong person, signs the agreement.

Amelie's conducts in the above cases (i) are all **omissions**, namely, not performing certain movements so that conditions which would result in certain outcomes are not altered, whereas those in the above cases (ii) are all **acts**, namely, movements that directly result in certain outcomes. The questions arise: Can there be any genuine moral difference between the act and omission in any of the above pairs of cases? If the answer is yes, what moral reason underlies it?

This brings us to a more general question: What moral reason would differentiate the moral status of an act and that of an omission? This research plans to approach such questions through a three-dimension theoretical framework (consequences, intentions and rights) bearing on the moral difference between acts and omissions, and explore its implications on both individual conducts and government's formulation of public policy, with a focus on the issue of organ donation introduced in the above fourth pair of cases.

