

Why 'It Doesn't Affect You' Is (Usually) a Bad Argument

About a month ago, I confronted an odd-looking man who had flagrantly double-parked his beat-up truck in the grocery store parking lot. Not only did he refuse to move; he also seemed incapable of understanding why anyone would have a problem with what he'd done. "What do you care?" he blustered. "You're already parked, and there are plenty of spots left. It doesn't affect you at all."

I tried to reason with him, but it was a waste of time, and I quickly descended into *ad hominem* attacks of which I had to repent later. Still, the interaction got me thinking. Why is the "it doesn't affect you" argument so prevalent?

I came across it again just last week while scrolling through Twitter. *Hillbilly Elegy* author, venture capitalist, and probable Senate candidate J.D. Vance had [tweeted](#), "I'm in DC today and just saw a group of girls on the Potomac rowing—outside in the sunshine—all of them with masks on. Just totally insane."

The replies were almost entirely negative, and the most common one was some version of [this](#): "Who cares? It literally doesn't effect [sic] you at all."

It's fairly easy to turn the tables on this argument and follow it to its absurd conclusion. After all, Vance's disapproval of outdoor mask-wearing doesn't affect his critics any more than outdoor mask-wearing affects Vance. The doctrine of live-and-let-live works both ways. Your behavior might not hurt me, but my opinion about your behavior doesn't hurt you either.

This standard leads inevitably to hypocrisy because holding it consistently would require an inhuman level of self-

ensorship. On the societal level, it shuts down debates that we really should be having, such as whether or not government and media fearmongering about COVID has gone too far. On the personal level, unless we are free to form and express opinions about the things we encounter, we won't be able to develop into fully formed individuals. By forming opinions about things that don't impact us and then questioning and refining those opinions, we prepare ourselves to act properly in similar situations that do impact us.

Of course, there is a world of difference between mere disapproval and disapproval expressing itself through compulsion. If Vance had ripped off the girls' masks or proposed a legislative ban on outdoor mask-wearing, the "it doesn't affect you" crowd would have a leg to stand on. But he didn't. He just criticized their decision to wear masks.

"My behavior doesn't affect you, so you have no right to criticize me" is a foolish argument. "My behavior doesn't affect you, so you have no right to force me to change it" is not (at least not always). The two concepts are not difficult to separate. Unfortunately, that doesn't stop some people, often feeling defensive after being called out, from confusing permissibility with wisdom or morality.

"It doesn't affect you" is an argument against meddling, not against criticism. It may be true that you ought to be *allowed* to do something, but that doesn't mean you ought to *do* it.

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