

The Power of Speech and the Empathy-Action Gap

Why Moral Inspiration Rarely Turns into Moral Action

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Language has always been one of humanity's most powerful tools. With nothing more than carefully chosen words, speakers have overthrown governments, initiated movements, unified crowds, and reshaped collective identity. In the face of crisis or injustice, societies often turn to speeches; the poetic, urgent, emotional calls that attempt to move people from passive awareness to active commitment. Yet for all the admiration we assign to great speakers and the inspiration drawn from their words, the truth is that the majority of speeches, no matter how morally moving, fail to provoke the kind of action they call for. They ignite emotion, but that emotion rarely extends beyond the instantaneous moment in which it is felt.

This conflict between inspiration and inaction is not new. Modern activist discourse is filled with speeches that captivate audiences but do not end up altering behavior. Malala Yousafzai's Nobel Peace Prize speech, for example, is celebrated for its emotional force and moral clarity, yet its powerful appeal for global education reform has not produced the widespread action its rhetoric demands (Yousafzai). To

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understand why this happens, it is important to look beyond the surface of persuasive language and examine the psychological and rhetorical forces that shape how audiences respond to moral speech. Scholars such as Jonathan Haidt show in their research that moral judgment comes from instant emotional intuition rather than deliberate reasoning, making speeches highly effective at generating empathy but not necessarily at motivating behavior. This means that people feel something right away when they hear a powerful speech, but those feelings do not usually last long enough to push them into actually doing anything. Paul Slovic adds that large scale injustices produce “psychic numbing,” a phenomenon in which people care less as the magnitude of suffering increases, directly weakening the impact of speeches that address global or abstract crises (Slovic 79). When a problem feels too big, people shut down emotionally, so even powerful speeches about global suffering struggle to move them. However, the bigger issue is the limits of what speech can actually do. J. L. Austin’s theory of speech acts helps explain why rhetoric alone struggles to cross the threshold into real action. A speech can attempt to perform a political or moral act, but whether it succeeds depends on the context, authority, and conditions that enable the audience to recognize and uptake that act (Austin 76). Together, these ideas show why people rarely act on moral speeches; they reveal the mental and language based barriers that get in the way.

Despite inaction covering the vast majority of speeches, exceptions exist, and these are the speeches that endure across history and continue to shape the changes we witness today. The rare moments when moral rhetoric does provoke action, such as Nicholas Winton’s impromptu 1988 remarks on the BBC program *That’s Life*, led to renewed refugee aid and real

humanitarian mobilization (“Nicholas Winton”). Historical reporting on the broadcast indicates that the renewed visibility of Winton’s story led to a surge in public interest and humanitarian engagement in the United Kingdom (“Nicholas Winton”). When narratives are concrete, accountability is personal, and the scale of suffering is small enough to grasp, speeches can connect the empathy–action gap and inspire real behavior and not just symbolic sentiment.

Throughout history, powerful speeches have often generated intense moral emotion but rarely translate that emotion into moral action. Listeners tend to experience intuitive moral responses when listening to these speeches, but show no signs of behavioral follow through, entering a state of psychological numbness and a lack of context needed for rhetorical appeals to work as effective speech acts. As a result, audiences usually disengage from personal responsibility and justify their inaction even when they feel moved, revealing a persistent empathy–action gap in modern activist discourse. However, the rare moments when speeches do produce action demonstrate that under specific conditions, rhetoric can overcome this gap. These successful cases tend to involve emotionally concrete narratives, direct personal accountability, and contexts in which the speaker’s authority, audience proximity, and scale of the issue align to create the conditions necessary for an illocutionary act to become a perlocutionary effect. These cases are the exception rather than the norm, but they are still able to reveal the rhetorical, psychological, and situational factors that can transform inspiration into action.

One of the most important reasons powerful speeches fail to generate action is that they primarily activate moral intuition instead of deliberate moral reasoning. Jonathan Haidt argues in his paper “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail” that

people form moral judgments through immediate emotional reactions. This is what he calls intuitions, and they are formed long before they engage in any kind of reflective thought. As he famously writes, “the emotional dog wags its rational tail” (Haidt 814). This means that emotion arrives first, and reasoning comes later only to justify what one already felt. This insight does not just explain how people judge moral situations; it also explains why moving speeches feel transformative in the moment but evaporate once the emotional charge fades. The audience’s first response is purely intuitive, and they might be thinking that something is unjust or that change is necessary, but intuitive judgments alone do not produce behavioral commitments that are sustained for longer periods of time. The instant emotional flash a speech creates is powerful, but it is fragile. It does not come with instructions for what to do next, so people stay stuck there. People confuse feeling emotional with actually taking moral action, so the emotion marks the end instead of the start. Haidt notes that reasoning only “serves to justify pre-existing intuitions” (Haidt 818), meaning that people often walk away from a speech reaffirmed in their values but unchanged in their behavior. Many listeners do not recognize this internal mechanism because the emotional moment feels morally significant. Crying, nodding, or applauding during a speech gives the illusion of participation, so the emotional experience becomes proof that the listener is a good or compassionate person. The feeling is rewarding by itself, almost like a moral self-affirmation. As a result, the emotional response satisfies the need for moral identification without requiring any next step. The rhetoric does not fail because it is weak, but because audiences treat emotional agreement as its own end point. The psychological comfort produced by the intuition makes active engagement feel redundant or

unnecessary. People feel that they have already taken part simply by feeling something, so the urgency that would motivate action dissolves.

Haidt's model also suggests that most audiences are not trained to challenge their intuitions with rational reflection. Moral reasoning takes time, patience, and self-scrutiny. It requires asking uncomfortable questions such as "What should I do?" or "What am I personally responsible for?" and most people tend to avoid this because reasoning can disrupt emotional comfort. Although people admire the speaker and agree morally, they do not interrogate the deeper implications of that agreement. Without a process that bridges feeling and responsibility, the listener remains stuck at the intuitive stage, where moral language feels meaningful but produces no real consequence.

This becomes even more visible when looking at Malala Yousafzai's Nobel Peace Prize speech. The audience reacts strongly to her story, especially to her survival of a violent attack and her advocacy for girls' education. They feel admiration and moral outrage, but these emotions remain at the intuitive level, as Haidt would predict. They are not channeled into a clear behavioral path. No single action feels clear or required for the listener, so the emotion stays on its own without leading anywhere. What makes Malala's speech so memorable is precisely what makes it limited: it generates moral feeling rather than moral decision. People listen, feel, and move on, because intuition has no mechanism for converting into action without further cognitive work.

Malala's speech is a particularly strong example because it contains every feature associated with moral elevation: an inspiring narrative, a sympathetic protagonist, a clear injustice, and a universally admired cause. Yet these same features

illustrate the difference between emotional admiration and practical engagement. Malala's story is heroic, but its scale is daunting. Audiences admire her bravery so intensely that they interpret admiration itself as moral involvement. The admiration becomes emotionally satisfying enough that the listener feels morally aligned without needing to take responsibility. They celebrate Malala's courage, but they do not translate that celebration into actual participation in her cause.

Furthermore, Malala's speech addresses an international injustice that extends far beyond the reach of any individual audience member. Her call to protect millions of girls who are denied access to schooling is morally compelling, but the magnitude of the problem creates a disconnect between moral outrage and personal agency. The listener senses that the problem is large, systemic, and embedded in political, cultural, and institutional structures that feel inaccessible. Although Malala's narrative is moving, the emotional elevation she produces does not come with an obvious behavioral route. Her speech confirms Haidt's prediction: people feel an intense moral intuition, but without deliberate reasoning or concrete guidance, the emotion does not survive long enough to motivate sustained involvement.

Another major reason moral speeches do not end up inspiring action is the issue of scale. Even when a speech produces strong emotion, that emotion collapses when the problem feels overwhelmingly large. Paul Slovic explains this through the idea of psychic numbing, the psychological tendency for people to care less as the number of victims increases, which shows that "compassion decreases as numbers increase" (Slovic 81). People respond to individuals rather than vast statistics or global crises. When suffering grows in scale, empathy shuts down. This matters for speeches because many

activist speakers address massive issues such as poverty, war, climate change, or millions of girls being denied education. The moment a speech shifts from individuals to masses, the audience's emotional engagement drops. Even if listeners start off moved, their minds retreat as the scope expands. They cannot picture millions, so the problem feels unfixable. The issue is not a lack of care but a sense of being powerless.

Slovic's research suggests that the human mind has evolved for small scale moral judgment. We are neurologically wired to respond to the story of one suffering person, one hungry child, or one family displaced by violence. The emotional imagination can handle personal suffering because it is vivid and cognitively manageable. However, once the suffering moves into large numbers, empathy weakens dramatically because the mind loses clarity. The image becomes abstract rather than concrete. When the individual disappears into the group, emotional investment dissolves. The problem ceases to feel human and becomes a statistic, and statistics rarely generate personal action (Slovic 2007).

This psychological limit has profound consequences for moral rhetoric. Activist speeches often appeal to global problems precisely because they want to show urgency, but global framing unintentionally undermines emotional focus. To produce urgency, speakers highlight magnitude, yet that magnitude triggers emotional withdrawal. Slovic's concept forces us to see the paradox: the very language that is meant to signal seriousness is also what makes people disengage. A speech that introduces global devastation can be morally accurate, but it is performatively ineffective because the audience becomes overwhelmed.

Listeners then rationalize their inaction not from indifference, but from perceived futility. They tell themselves

that the issue is too large, too complicated, too distant, or too deeply embedded in political systems to change through individual effort. Even if the audience feels emotional intensity, the internal reasoning becomes “my contribution would be meaningless,” which dissolves the motivation to act. The empathy–action gap widens not because compassion disappears, but because compassion stops feeling useful. Psychic numbing transforms moral urgency into resignation.

J. L. Austin’s theory of speech acts offers a different explanation for why inspiring speeches rarely turn into real behavior. Austin argues that whenever someone speaks, they are not just sharing information; they are trying to perform an action through language. In activist speeches, the speaker is trying to urge, command, or motivate the audience. These attempts, which Austin calls illocutionary acts, only work if the audience recognizes and accepts the force behind them. When they do not recognize it, the speech act collapses (Austin 1962). This helps explain why so many moral speeches misfire. A call to action is not enough on its own. Malala’s speech illustrates this problem clearly. Her appeals for global action on girls’ education function as illocutionary acts, but her audience does not have a direct way to act on her words. The listener might agree with her emotionally, but Austin would say that the performative force cannot complete itself because the audience lacks the authority or position to enact the structural changes she calls for.

While most speeches fail to provoke real change, Nicholas Winton’s brief remarks on a 1988 BBC broadcast show what it looks like when moral language in a speech actually leads to action. Winton was not delivering a grand political speech. He was quietly explaining how he had rescued Jewish children during World War Two (“Nicholas Winton”). Unlike calls that

address global problems or millions of victims, his story focused on specific, recognizable lives. Viewers did not need to imagine large-scale suffering because they could picture one child at a time. This kept the issue small enough to feel understandable and possible, avoiding psychic numbing. Historical reporting on the broadcast indicates that increased public interest and humanitarian sponsorship followed the renewed visibility of his story (“Nicholas Winton”). The audience could understand how to act, and the pathway from emotion to behavior became clear.

When these ideas come together, a clear pattern emerges. Speeches rarely fall short because they lack emotion or moral clarity, but because the conditions needed for action are almost never in place. Haidt shows that listeners respond to rhetoric with quick moral intuition rather than sustained reasoning. Slovic reveals how large-scale issues overwhelm the very emotions speeches try to spark. Austin helps explain why many calls to action fail as performative acts: they ask audiences to do things they cannot realistically do. Malala’s speech embodies these limits. It is powerful and deeply moving, but its global scope and distant audience make action feel impossible. Winton’s remarks show the opposite. His story stayed small, concrete, and personal, and the context gave listeners a sense of what Austin would call real uptake. Together, these examples show that the empathy-action gap is not a failure of language, but a result of the fragile psychological and contextual structures that shape how people respond to moral appeals.

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