

under a greater obligation to help those whose misfortunes we have caused. (It is for this reason that advocates of increased foreign aid often argue that the rich nations have created the poverty of the poor nations, through forms of economic exploitation that go back to the colonial system.) On the other hand, any consequentialist would insist that we are responsible for all the consequences of our actions; and if a consequence of my spending money on an iPod is that someone dies, I am responsible for that death. It is true that the person would have died even if I had never existed, but what is the relevance of that? The fact is that I do exist, and the consequentialist will say that our responsibilities derive from the world as it is, not as it might have been.

One way of making sense of the non-consequentialist² view of 20 responsibility is to base it on a theory of rights of the kind proposed by John Locke and more recently defended by libertarians like Robert Nozick and Jan Narveson.³ If everyone has a right to life, and this right is a right *against* others who might threaten my life but not a right to assistance from others when my life is in danger, then we can understand the feeling that we are responsible for killing but not for omitting to save. The former violates the rights of others, the latter does not.

Should we accept such a theory of rights? If we build up our theory of rights by imagining, as Locke and Nozick do, individuals living independently from one another in a "state of nature," it may seem natural to adopt a conception of rights in which as long as each leaves the other alone, no rights are violated. I might, on this view, quite properly have maintained my independent existence if I had wished to do so. So if I do not make you any worse off than you I would have been if I had had nothing at all to do with you, how can I have violated your rights? The factual basis of this theory is doubtful. Thomas Pogge challenges it in *World Poverty and Human Rights*, arguing that several features of the world economic order show that we contribute to the impoverishment of some people to our own benefit. To take just one example, we rely on oil and minerals bought from countries ruled by dictators who use the money to enrich themselves or to strengthen

² Consequentialists decide whether an action is ethical by evaluating its results, while non-consequentialists evaluate only the action itself, regardless of outcomes. For example, a non-consequentialist might say that lying is unethical no matter what, whereas a consequentialist might say that lying is ethically sound if it saves a person from harm or embarrassment. Singer is a consequentialist.

³ These philosophers propose that humans have a set of "natural rights," generally including rights to life, liberty, and property.

their armies and entrench themselves in power. These dictators have no moral right to the wealth that lies beneath the soil of the countries in which they have seized power. The proceeds should go to the people of the country as a whole. The dictators are robbers and murderers, and we are receivers of stolen goods. Our willingness to hand over billions of dollars to dictators in return for oil and mineral rights also creates a huge incentive for anyone who fancies their chances of overthrowing an existing government, and thus increases instability in these countries, which in turn contributes to poverty.

Even if we put aside such problems with the factual basis of the libertarian argument, we need to ask why we should start from the unhistorical, abstract and ultimately inexplicable idea of a human being living independently. Our ancestors were — like other primates — social beings long before they were human beings, and they could not have developed the abilities and capacities of human beings if they had not been social beings first. We are not, now, isolated individuals, and we never have been. So why should we assume that rights must be restricted to rights against interference? We might, instead, adopt the view that taking rights to life seriously is incompatible with standing by and watching people die when one could easily save them.

(4) What of the difference in motivation? That a person does not positively wish for the death of another lessens the severity of the blame she deserves, but not by as much as is suggested by our present attitudes to giving aid. The behavior of the speeding motorist is again comparable, for such motorists usually have no desire at all to kill anyone. They merely want to get somewhere sooner, or they enjoy speeding and are indifferent to the consequences. Despite their lack of malice, those who kill with cars deserve not only blame but also severe punishment.

(5) The difference I have left for last is the most significant. The fact that to avoid killing people is normally not difficult whereas to save all one possibly could save is heroic must make an important difference to our attitude to failure to do what the respective principles demand. Not to kill is a minimum standard of acceptable conduct we can require of everyone. In contrast, to save all one possibly could is not something that can realistically be required, especially not in societies accustomed to giving as little as ours do. Given the generally accepted standards, people who give, say, 10 percent of what they earn to help the poor are more aptly praised for their above-average generosity than blamed for giving less than they might. The appropriateness of praise and blame is, however, a separate issue from the rightness or wrongness of actions. The former evaluates the agent; the latter

evaluates the action. Perhaps many people who give 10 percent really ought to give 50 percent, but to blame them for not giving more could be counterproductive. It might make them feel that what is required is too demanding, and if one is going to be blamed anyway, one might as well not give anything at all. That an ethic that puts saving all one possibly can on the same footing as not killing would be an ethic for saints or heroes should not lead us to assume that the alternative must be an ethic that makes it obligatory not to kill but puts us under no obligation to save anyone. There are positions in between these extremes, as we shall see.

Let's summarize the five differences that normally exist between killing and allowing to die in the context of extreme poverty and overseas aid. The lack of an identifiable victim is of no moral significance, though it may play an important role in explaining our attitude. The idea that we are directly responsible for those we kill, but not for those we do not help, depends on a questionable notion of responsibility and may need to be based on a dubious theory of rights. Differences in certainty and motivation are ethically significant and show that not aiding the poor is not to be condemned as murdering or reckless driving, which is serious enough. Finally, the difficulty of completely discharging the duty of saving all one possibly can makes it inappropriate to blame those who fall short of this target in the same way that we blame those who kill, but this does not show that the act itself is less serious. Nor does it excuse those who make no effort to save anyone.

In any case, whereas failing to save a life may not always be ethically on par with deliberate killing, it is clear that how we respond to the existence of both absolute poverty and absolute affluence is one of the great moral issues of our time. So let us consider afresh whether we have an obligation to assist those whose lives are in danger and, if so, how this obligation applies to the present world situation.

The Obligation to Assist

The Argument for an Obligation to Assist

On my way to give a lecture, I pass a shallow ornamental pond and notice that a small child has fallen in and is in danger of drowning. I look around to see where the parents, or babysitter, are, but to my surprise, I see that there is no one else around. It seems that it is up to me to make sure that the child doesn't drown. Would anyone deny that I

ought to wade in and pull the child out? This will mean getting my clothes muddied, ruining my shoes and either cancelling my lecture or delaying it until I can find something dry to change into, but compared with the avoidable death of a child none of these things are significant. A plausible principle that would support the judgment that I ought to pull the child out is this: if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, we ought to do it. This principle seems uncontroversial. It will obviously win the assent of consequentialists; but non-consequentialists should accept it too, because the injunction to prevent what is bad applies only when nothing comparably significant is at stake. Thus, the principle cannot lead to the kinds of actions of which non-consequentialists strongly disapprove — serious violations of individual rights, injustice, broken promises and so on. If non-consequentialists regard any of these as comparable in moral significance to the bad thing that is to be prevented, they will automatically regard the principle as not applying in those cases in which the bad thing can only be prevented by violating rights, doing injustice, breaking promises or whatever else is at stake. Most non-consequentialists hold that we ought to prevent what is bad and promote what is good. Their dispute with consequentialists lies in their insistence that this is not the sole ultimate ethical principle: that it is an ethical principle is not denied by any plausible ethical theory. Nevertheless, the uncontroversial appearance of the principle that we ought to prevent what is bad when we can do so without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance is deceptive. If it were taken seriously and acted on, our lives and our world would be fundamentally changed. For the principle applies, not just to rare situations in which one can save a child from a pond, but to the everyday situation in which we can assist those living in absolute poverty. In saying this, I assume that absolute poverty, with its hunger and malnutrition, lack of shelter, illiteracy, disease, high infant mortality and low life expectancy, is a bad thing. Additionally, I assume that it is within the power of the affluent to reduce absolute poverty, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance. If these two assumptions and the principle we have been discussing are correct, we have an obligation to help those in absolute poverty that is no less strong than our obligation to rescue a drowning child from a pond. Not to help would be wrong, whether or not it is intrinsically equivalent to killing. Helping is not, as conventionally thought, a charitable act that is praiseworthy to do but not wrong to omit. It is something that everyone ought to do.

Set out more formally, this argument would look like this.

- First premise: If we can prevent something bad without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, we ought to do it.
- Second premise: Extreme poverty is bad.
- Third premise: There is some extreme poverty we can prevent without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance.
- Conclusion: We ought to prevent some extreme poverty.

Understanding the Text

1. Would you agree that the author of this reading, Peter Singer, designed his "shallow pond" scenario (paragraphs 27-29) to show all of his readers that he and they share a moral principle in common? What, in your own words, is that principle?
2. Did Singer judge correctly that his readers would also subscribe to it? Recap all the reasons why, according to Singer, very few of us apply that moral principle to the problem of premature death in impoverished regions of the world.

Reflection and Response

3. Review Singer's *rebuttals* of the reasons for inaction — his ways of explaining why those reasons are inadequate. Which of his rebuttals do you find compelling? Which, not? Why?
4. A student who became upset with Singer wrote in the margin of this piece, "Are we supposed to dispose of all our income to Third World countries?" How similar to that reaction is your own?

Making Connections

5. Certain readings in this book — in particular, the Roper Center Survey (p. 24) and Charles Murray's "What's So Bad about Being Poor?" (p. 26) — suggest that what we mean by "being poor" changes over time and from one setting to another. In that connection, is the World Bank definition of absolute poverty (paraphrased by Singer in paragraphs 1 and 2 of this reading) helpful? If so, in what sense? If not, why?
6. Research the "categorical imperative," a demanding version of the Golden Rule introduced by philosopher Immanuel Kant. Would you describe Peter Singer's stance as Kantian?
7. A disciple of Singer's named Peter Unger took the ideas in "Rich and Poor" and expanded them into a whole book, which he titled *Living High and Letting Die*. How would you assess that title in terms of aptness? How would you assess it in rhetorical terms — in terms of its effect on prospective readers?