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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Famine Relief: The Duties We Have to Others

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In developing countries, 6 million children die each year, mostly from hunger-related causes.

Bread for the World Institute

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead

Positive Duties

Any moral theory that requires one ceaselessly to sacrifice for the common good should be rejected as too demanding. In my view, we need not apologize for devoting the lion's share of our time and resources to our own self-regarding projects and the people we love. However, if another person is gravely imperiled and one can rescue her at no unreasonable cost to oneself, then one has a moral duty to do so.

Imagine, for instance, that you are lounging by the pool at the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. In one hand you have a frozen margarita, in the other you hold a copy of this book. Ordinarily, of course, the essays in this volume would hold your undivided attention. On this occasion, however, you find yourself reading the same few sentences over and over again, as you repeatedly lift your head to check out the scantily clad, hard-bodied men and women frolicking in and around the pool. As you survey the "beautiful people," you notice that an unattended infant has just fallen into the water and will surely drown unless someone immediately saves her (Singer, 1972). Are you morally required to jump in and rescue the baby? Does it matter that she is not your child and that you have no special relationship with her?
I presume that virtually everyone reading this would agree that you ought to rescue the child, even if doing so would involve spilling your margarita and ruining the book. Perhaps we would not be obligated to help if the baby were not imperiled (we need not come to the infant’s aid if she merely needed another coat of sunscreen or a long overdue diaper change, for instance) or if the assistance would be unreasonably costly (as it might be if one was holding the Mona Lisa, rather than a copy of this book). Because the baby is sufficiently imperiled and you could save her without sacrificing anything significant, however, it does not matter that you are in no way related to or especially responsible for the child. Thus, it is no defense to callously protest: “It’s not my baby,” or “I never agreed to baby-sit that kid.” These defenses might be relevant in some instances (if someone questioned why you had not changed the baby’s diaper, for instance), but they are not germane in this case because all of us have positive moral duties to rescue even anonymous strangers when they are sufficiently imperiled and we can do so without significant cost to ourselves.

I take the preceding analysis to be merely commonsensical, and thus I presume that most people reading this chapter will not seriously object to anything at this early stage. Notice, however, that surprising implications follow from granting that we have moral duties to rescue others when they are sufficiently imperiled and we can assist them at no unreasonable cost. This is because there are currently masses of children starving to death, and virtually everyone reading this book is wealthy enough to save some of them without sacrificing anything significant. Thus, for the very same reasons that you would morally required to save the drowning infant at the Hard Rock pool, you are morally required to contribute a modest amount, say $100, to saving the lives of a few children who are currently starving to death.

At this point, one might object that there is a huge difference between saving a drowning child in your immediate presence and sending money to help anonymous foreign children who are starving in some unfamiliar place, thousands of miles away. I acknowledge that these two scenarios are likely to feel different to many of us, but I suggest that there is no morally relevant difference between them. In other words, whatever effect the difference in nationality, the physical distance, or the use of mediating devices might make in motivating us to rescue someone else, the moral relations between you and the starving distant foreigner are the same as those between you and the drowning infant (Singer, 1972).

To see that common nationality is not necessary to ground a duty to rescue, think again of the drowning infant at the pool. Suppose that you are American: does it matter whether or not the infant is also American? I presume not. Imagine, for instance, if an American who sat and watched the infant drown defended herself in the following fashion: “Ordinarily I would have leapt in to save the child, but I did not do so in this case because I knew she was Australian.” Would this strike you as an adequate defense? I assume that most people reading this book would not accept this justification because the infant’s nationality is irrelevant. As long as the infant is sufficiently imperiled and one can rescue her without sacrificing anything significant, it makes no difference what nationality the two parties are because Samaritan duties are owed to fellow human beings, not just to compatriots. (Notice, for instance, that the biblical story from which Samaritan duties derive their name involves a gentleman from Samaria saving an imperiled stranger, not a fellow Samaritan.)
Moreover, it is worth adding that it is equally irrelevant whether the rescuer and the imperiled person are on the same country's soil. Imagine, for instance, that the pool in question is not in Las Vegas but is on a desert resort that straddles the US/Mexico border. Suppose that in order to create a "Swim to Mexico" gimmick, the resort designed the small pool so that one side is in the US and the other in Mexico. Would it make a difference whether the infant fell in the American or the Mexican portion of the pool? Presumably not. Combining these two points, a Canadian tourist lounging on the American side of the pool who saw an Australian infant fall in the Mexican portion of the pool would be just as morally obligated to perform the rescue as an American tourist on the American side of the pool who saw an American infant drowning in the American portion of the pool. In short, both the citizenship of the parties and the country in which the rescue must be performed are morally irrelevant.

What is crucial is whether the rescue is sufficiently imperiled and can be saved at no unreasonable cost to the rescuer; where both of these conditions obtain, neither nationality nor national location makes a difference.

At this point, one might object that while the national location of the two parties is irrelevant, their spatial location does make a difference because one can be bound only to assist those in one's close proximity. To appreciate the moral relevance of distance, this critic might ask us to imagine that one is lounging beside the ocean rather than a pool. Suppose that one sees (perhaps through binoculars) an infant fall off the back of a boat ten miles offshore. (And suppose that those on the boat did not notice the infant's fall and that there is no one else on the beach at the time.) Under these circumstances, when the imperiled person is no longer right under one's nose, so to speak, it is not so clear that one has a moral duty. And this is explained, the skeptic suggests, by the distance between oneself and the infant.

I acknowledge that there may be no Samaritan duty in this case, but I deny that this is due merely to the physical distance separating the two parties. In my view, the distance itself is not morally significant; if one has no duty to rescue a drowning infant ten miles offshore, it is either because one is unable to do so (since the infant would no doubt drown before one could swim out to it) or because doing so would be unreasonably costly (since the rescuer might reasonably fear drowning or being attacked by sharks). To see that the distance itself is morally irrelevant, though, imagine that one has freakishly long arms that enable one to pull the baby out of the ocean without even getting out of one's chair on the beach (Kamm, 2000). (Or, if such long arms are too difficult to fathom, imagine that one has a super speedboat, a jetpack, or even a giant crane that would enable one safely to retrieve the infant in a matter of seconds.) Under these circumstances, I suspect that most would agree that one has a duty to save the drowning infant. Thus, once we strip this scenario of the features that undermine one's capacity to perform the rescue at no unreasonable cost, we see that the issue of distance is not in itself morally relevant.

Finally, notice that it makes no moral difference whether one's rescue is mediated by devices or other people. Imagine, for instance, that after spending a couple of hours by the Hard Rock pool, you decide that you had better return to your hotel room before you get sun-burned. Fortunately, the hotel has close-circuit television coverage of the pool, so you can continue to check out the lively scene from the comfort of your air-conditioned room. While watching on your room's television, you notice...
the infant fall into the pool. Because you are staying on the 30th floor, there is no way that you could make it down to the pool in time to save herself. Without getting out of your chair, however, you could pick up your cell phone and call the bartender at the poolside bar, who – once alerted – could easily rescue the infant herself. It seems to me that you are just as obligated to make that call (even if there would be a substantial charge on your cell bill) as you would be to dive into the pool yourself. It makes no difference, in other words, whether one can personally rescue the drowning child all on one's own, or whether one can merely play a part in the rescue by calling others who, once informed, can complete the rescue.

But notice: once one recognizes that neither nationality, distance, nor the use of mediating devices and people in any way diminishes one's duty to rescue imperiled strangers, it is clear that one's duty to rescue drowning children on another part of the planet is just as pressing as the initial poolside rescue with which we began. Indeed, the last scenario of using one's cell phone to initiate a rescue of someone whom one sees drowning on a television monitor is very much like a situation that many of us routinely experience. We are watching something entertaining on television when a commercial alerts us that starving children desperately need our help. If we have a duty to jump in the pool to save the infant, and we have a duty to make a relatively expensive cellular phone call to the poolside bar, then why do we not equally have a duty to use our cell phone to make a modest donation (say, $100) to the institution saving the starving children? If (1) the fact that the children are citizens of another country is irrelevant, if (2) the physical distance between you and them makes no difference, if (3), like the loss of the margarita and the damage to one's book, the loss of $100 is not an unreasonable sacrifice, and if (4) the use of mediating devices like cell phones, credit cards, and international relief agencies is not important, then it is hard not to conclude that one's moral duty to send money to famine relief is just as strong as one's duty to jump in the pool to save a drowning child.

At this point one might protest that there remains a big difference between saving a single drowning infant and sending money to help masses of starving children: the number of people imperiled. Numbers might be thought to matter because when there is only one imperiled person, her peril becomes salient in a way that explains why you as a potential rescuer have no discretion but to help her. When there are numerous imperiled people (so many, in fact, that you could not possibly rescue all of them), no single individual's peril is salient, and thus one retains the discretion as to whether or not to help.

I agree that numbers can sometimes matter, but I do not think they can make the type of difference that this objection supposes. More specifically, I acknowledge that one enjoys some discretion when there are more imperiled people than one could possibly save, but it is not the discretion of whether or not to perform the rescue; rather, it is merely the choice of whom to rescue.

Most who believe that we have a duty to assist others do not couch their arguments in the language of rights, but I would explain this discretion in terms of the correlative rights to assistance. Thus, to return to our initial example, I would say that the drowning infant in Hard Rock pool has a Samaritan right that you rescue her. If the situation were altered slightly so that there were two babies in the pool, and you could save either of them, you must still save the one whose peril is salient. Thus, you save her. If you had the right to save either of them (Feinberg 1980), you would justify rescuing her because her peril was salient. If the child fell in, the case becomes the same. In short, one's moral duties, and therefore one's heartfelt and heartfelt desires, are exercised against a single crisis that one can observe.

Finally, imagine it costs $100 to furnish an orphan's new home. The orphan might be one of the many millions of orphans in the world's poorest countries, or one of the hundreds of thousands of orphans here in the United States. There would be a good reason to raise up $100 with the help of your parents, friends, and coworkers (and either child and credit-card tel- emates), and spend it on safe, clean, and healthy homes for orphans. Of course, it is reasonable to do this in lieu of doing something more, but it might seem that, if we buy our orphans a telephone, or buy our orphan a television, we are not doing what we are obligated to do.

Before one can compare differences in salience, of course, one must compare the salience of Imperilled children. For example, we also have many imperilled children in the United States, and we have a moral duty to save all of them. Thus, if we cannot save all of them, perhaps we are obligated to do something to save some of them.
and you could not possibly save both, would you say that you no longer have any duty to rescue at all? Presumably not. The more sensible conclusion, I think, is that you must still rescue one of the babies, and you may choose which to rescue. In terms of the infant’s rights, obviously neither of the two drowning babies has a right that you save her in particular, but I would say that each has a right that you save one of them (Feinberg, 1984). Thus, just as a lounging by the Hard Rock pool could not justify rescuing neither of the infants with the lame excuse that “Once the second child fell in, I knew that I could not save both,” the fact that we cannot save all of the world’s people from starving to death provides no justification for not rescuing some. In short, while the world’s current situation is admittedly much more messy and heartbreaking than our imagined situation of a single drowning baby who is seen by a single sun-bather, there is nothing about the complexity of the actual world’s crises that makes our duty to rescue any less stringent.

Finally, let me comment on my suggestion that each of us has a duty to donate $100 to famine relief. I suspect that virtually everyone reading this book could easily give substantially more than $100 without sacrificing anything significant, but I chose this conservative sum because it is a round number that is in the general neighborhood, at least, of what it would cost to replace the drink and book that I imagined might be ruined in the initial rescue situation. Let me quickly respond, however, to those who might object that $100 is too large an amount to expect people, especially students, to sacrifice.

There will invariably be exceptional cases, of course, of people who could not give up $100 without sacrificing something morally significant. Some students are working parents, for instance, who have too little money even to buy the assigned texts (they either check the books out of the library or routinely borrow them from patient classmates), and who could not part with $100 and still manage to pay for their children’s health insurance. If that sounds something like your situation, then it seems only reasonable to conclude that you could not contribute to famine relief without sacrificing something morally significant. If we are being honest, however, the vast majority of us must admit that we could charge $100 to our credit card and still shop at A&F, buy our coffee at Starbucks, order our dinner from Domino’s, watch MTV on cable television, and talk with friends on our cell phones. If so, then it is hard to say with a straight face that we have no duty to save the lives of starving children because doing so would require us to sacrifice something significant.

Before moving on, let me acknowledge that in the past there was a profound difference between our moral responsibilities to an infant drowning in our midst and a child starving to death in some distant land. This difference stemmed from our lack of information regarding, and capacity to save, the latter. Times have changed, however, and so has the scope of our moral responsibilities (Singer, 1972). We do not have freakishly long arms that enable us literally to reach out and feed people thousands of miles away, but we do have other instruments that are just as effective. We have an international media that can inform us about distant tragedies, we have international relief agencies dedicated to performing acts of rescue, and we have phones and credit cards that enable us conveniently to transfer our funds to these agencies. Thus, if you are unwilling to contribute money to help save the lives of several starving children, it is hard to see why there is any difference, morally speaking, between

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you and a loafer by the Hard Rock pool who cannot be bothered to put down her drink and book to save the drowning infant.

**Negative Duties**

One of the most frequent objections to sending money to the masses of famine-stricken people around the world is that these famines are not strictly accidents; rather, they are brought on at least in part by inefficient or corrupt political and business institutions. The twofold thought behind this observation is: "Why should I have to bail out these people when they played a part in creating their own misfortune and are likely to do so again?" It is common to argue in response either that the specific famine in question was in fact an unforeseeable accident or that, however much political and/or business leaders might be to blame for the severity of the problem, surely those actually starving to death are no more responsible for the unforgiving conditions that caused their peril than we are for the favorable conditions that (largely) explain our wealth. Here I will pursue neither of these routes. Instead, I shall concede that much of the world's poverty is at least exacerbated and prolonged (if not outright caused) by national and international institutions, but I will argue that this fact only strengthens the case for the duty to offer assistance because it illustrates that we have negative as well as positive duties to assist the world's most needy.

Before exploring the relationship between political institutions and world hunger, I would like to suggest that we have a negative duty to neither support nor profit from institutions that wrongly harm others (Pogge, 2002). The basic idea behind this claim is merely that, just as we should not personally harm others, nor should we either support or profit from institutions that do so. Imagine, for instance, that your parents own slaves and therefore are able to provide a comfortable life for you. Among other things, they pay for your college tuition with the profits they garner from the slave labor. Should you accept this money from them? What would you think of a daughter of slave-owners who defended her privileged life by saying: "I agree that owning slaves is morally repulsive, but that provides no reason to criticize me because I don't own any slaves!"

I can understand why someone might contend either that children should not accept money from slave-owning parents or even that adult children should have nothing to do with their slave-owning parents, but I would argue for a more modest claim. Because children have limited influence over their parents, and because it would be an enormous sacrifice for most college-age children to have nothing to do with, or perhaps even to accept no financial support from, their parents, I suggest merely the following: if one is going to accept money from one's slave-owning parents, then one must at least make a conscientious effort to persuade one's parents that owning slaves is wrong. In other words, accepting the benefits of an unjust institution like slavery requires one, at the very least, to work to eliminate the unjust institution.

As I indicated above, the rationale for this conclusion is the commonsensical position that one should not be an accessory to injustice. As an historical example of someone who took this moral directive to heart, consider Henry David Thoreau. Both because of its support for the practice of slavery and because of its engagement in
the Mexican War. Thoreau was convinced that the United States government was a powerful instrument for injustice. Not wanting to support such an institution with his actions or money, Thoreau retreated to Walden Pond, where he lived in relative isolation, refusing to pay any taxes to the US government. In my view, Thoreau is to be applauded for his concerns about supporting an unjust institution, but he went above and beyond the call of duty by completely divorcing himself from political society. According to the modest view I am advocating here, one could not have objected to Thoreau's enjoying the benefits of political life as long as he worked to reform US policy.

For a more recent example of how one might try to influence an unjust institution, consider the student activism during apartheid South Africa. When I was an undergraduate, South Africa had an oppressive system of apartheid, wherein the whites oppressed the blacks. Despite being a numerical minority, the whites were able effectively to exploit the blacks because they controlled the political and financial institutions. What is more, the international community effectively buttressed the whites' privileged position by investing in their businesses and recognizing their government as legitimate. At the University of North Carolina, where I was in school, there was a relatively small group of well-informed students who were disturbed by the injustices being perpetrated in South Africa. [I regret to say that I was not among their number.] Distraught that their university was contributing to the injustice by investing in some of the South African companies that played a part in this oppressive system, these students lobbied the relevant authorities to divest the university of all South African holdings. As you might imagine, however, a few students did not wield a great deal of influence over the University's investment portfolio. Rather than give up, however, these students built a "shanty town" in a prominent place on campus (on the main quad, right below the Chancellor's office, actually). The students lived in these makeshift huts for months to call attention to the plight of blacks in South Africa who were forcibly relegated to ghettos where they lived in similar conditions. Over time, these huts attracted more and more embarrassing attention until the university finally decided to divest itself of all South African companies.

In my view, this story provides a prime example of how one might work to make one's institutions more just. Had these students been more like Thoreau, they might have simply withdrawn from school, so as not to play a supporting role in the perpetuation of injustice. Leaving school is a huge sacrifice, though, especially when one considers that virtually all schools were invested in South African companies, and thus there was nowhere else that these conscientious students could have enrolled. Under these conditions, it is enough for these students to make a concerted effort to reform their university. (Indeed, I should think that living in makeshift huts goes well beyond what could reasonably be asked of an average student, and thus they could have stayed in school in good conscience even if they had done considerably less—such as merely sponsoring petitions and organizing rallies.) Notice also that it is too much to require that students continue their efforts until they prevail. Students typically exert very little influence over university policy, and thus all one can ask is that they make a concerted effort to get their school to stop supporting major injustices. Finally, I would suggest that remaining within an institution and working for its reform is in many ways preferable to completely withdrawing from the institution.

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because the former involves being an agent for positive change. Therefore, while it is sometimes thought to be better to keep one’s hands entirely clean of injustice, working from the inside to improve an unjust institution can often be the best way to fight the good fight. (Indeed, if no one worked from within to reform corrupt institutions, these institutions would be left under the exclusive control of those who were either ignorant of or indifferent to injustice. Thus, it is perhaps best if some fight from without and others fight from within.) With this in mind, let us now return to the objection that we cannot be expected to save the victims of famines that were at least partly caused by institutional mismanagement.

Recent research confirms that there is indeed a correlation between the quality of one’s government and the degree to which one is protected from famine (Drez and Sen, 1989). In particular, evidence indicates that effective democratic governance virtually insures that a country will not be ravaged by a widespread famine with which it cannot internally cope. This might seem counter-intuitive to those of us who think of famines as natural disasters but, on reflection, this claim makes perfect sense. Most of us have various qualms with our governments, but those of us fortunate enough to live in liberal democratic states take it for granted that governments are designed to be mutually beneficial institutions that more or less serve their constituents. In far too many instances, however, political power is not democratically distributed, and the government is a powerful institution designed to serve the tiny elite who happen to wield the political power. Just as apartheid South Africa was designed maximally to benefit the politically empowered whites, for instance, some governments are ruled so as to work to the greatest advantage of the dictator and her closest friends and family. It does not take much imagination to see why a government designed to benefit just a small fraction of the population would be uninterested and/or unable effectively to prevent famines, but it does require some explanation as to how such a government can stay in power. Think of it this way: if people more than 200 years ago in France and the American Colonies were able to overthrow oppressive governments, why are there currently so many people in the world who are either uninterested in or unable to establish effective democratic governments?

The answer to this last question is simply “brute force.” Dictators are often able to maintain their oppressive regimes simply because they control the military, and they ruthlessly use this power to suppress anyone who seeks democratic reform. Of course, staying in power requires a vicious circle because the dictators are typically able to retain the military’s loyalty only as long as they have the money to pay them, and they can acquire the necessary funds only if they continue to exploit their political power. What I want to call attention to now, though, is more specifically how these dictators are able to use their political power to generate wealth. Part of the answer, of course, simply comes from taxes that (insofar as the funds are used to benefit the ruler rather than the people themselves) essentially enslave the political subjects. Another important part of the equation, however, is that dictators frequently amass huge sums of money by selling the country’s natural resources to foreign companies and governments. Thus, if a dictator’s country has extensive oil reserves, for instance, then the dictator can sell this oil and use the money to secure her military stranglehold over her subjects.

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Here, two points clearly emerge. First and most obviously, the mere fact that a dictator effectively controls the country's natural resources does not make her morally entitled to those resources any more than a slave-owner's effective control over her slaves implies that she is morally entitled to the fruits of those slaves' labor. Secondly, and more importantly for our purposes here, foreign companies are an integral part of the problem because, in seeking to acquire natural resources as cheaply as possible, they are giving the undemocratic leaders the money necessary to continue their unjust domination over their political subjects. In a very real sense, it is if these companies were buying cheap cotton from slave-owners who were using this money to buy more guns and slaves.

If all of this is right, where does it leave you and me? Where does it leave those of us who enjoy our clothes from A&F, our coffee from Starbucks, our dinners from Domino's, our cell phones from Sprint, and our MTV on cable television? Certainly, part of the reason we are able to enjoy these luxuries is because we work extremely hard in order to be able to buy these things for ourselves and those we love. But equally certainly, another part of the reason we enjoy these luxuries is because we benefit from an economic system that utilizes natural resources bought very cheaply from political leaders who have control over these resources only because they happen to have the military power to suppress their compatriots. Thus, you and I profit from an overall economic system that plays a prominent role in propelling up military dictators who in turn create the political conditions that play a causal role in the world's worst famines. In the end, then, the role that political and business institutions play in contributing to famine does not undermine our duty to send money to famine relief; on the contrary, it explains why we have not only positive duties to help those who are currently starving to death, but also negative duties to work to change the system so that future famines do not occur. In other words, just as Thoreau felt the need to divine himself from an unjust political institution, I should recognize our obligation to either withdraw from or seek to reform the current political and economic environment.

Now, just as it was extremely costly for Thoreau to withdraw from political society and it would have been a huge sacrifice for my fellow students to withdraw from school, virtually none of us is willing entirely to divorce herself from the existing international economic system. But if we are going to continue helping ourselves to the spoils of an unjust political and economic environment, then we have a responsibility to work conscientiously to make this system a more just one. If we continue to participate in the system without working diligently for its reform, on the other hand, then we are morally no different from the daughter of slave-owners who defends her willingness to accept gifts made possible only via the exploitation of slaves by saying: "Don't blame me; I don't own any slaves." Just as it would clearly not be too much to ask this daughter to try to persuade her parents of the injustice of slavery, it is not too much to ask you and me to work to make the international economic and political order more just.

At this point, it is tempting to protest that there is nothing one can do. Calling one of the agencies I listed above and giving $100 on one's credit card is a relatively simple act that will make a real difference for people who would otherwise stars to
death, but how in the world is one supposed to change the international economic and political order?

This worry is understandable, but it is important to remember that you are not morally required to change the system; you are merely obligated conscientiously to work to reform it. Even so, one might object, it is not even clear how to begin? I concede that it is hard not to feel impotent in the face of such enormous institutions, but notice that the world has already experienced wave after wave of moral reform, and each of these changes had to start somewhere. Think, for instance, of Henry David Thoreau. It is unrealistic to suppose that Thoreau thought he could single-handedly get the US to abolish slavery, but there is no question that the integrity with which he lived his life had a profound influence on others who, over time, were able successfully to abolish slavery. Similarly, my fellow college students who built the shanty town on campus were among those who raised awareness of the horrors of apartheid South Africa until the international community gradually ceased supporting and ultimately began placing reformist pressures on the relevant political and economic institutions. More recently still, think about what a profound change has occurred regarding recycling in the United States. Not very long ago, one could not help but think that there was nothing substantial one could do. Over a remarkably brief period of time, however, environmental and political activists were able to change the system so that municipalities now routinely provide services that make it easy (if not mandatory) for each of us to contribute to a large-scale recycling effort.

If these and countless other monumental reform movements can succeed, then there is no reason to suppose that each of us cannot do our part in a movement to change international business and politics so that military dictators are no longer able to oppress their constituents in ways that, among other things, contribute to the frequency and severity of famines. I am not the most imaginative person, but it strikes me that anyone reading this chapter for a class could begin by trying to raise awareness on her own campus. Perhaps with the help of the professor who teaches the class, one might begin by organizing a student forum to publicize the issue and form a group on campus that can subsequently come up with additional ideas to spread the word and inspire constructive action. I cannot promise that you will change the world, but I do know that the incentives to perpetuate the current system are strong, so the world will not change without people like you dedicating their time and energy to making it a more just place.

Conclusion

Virtually everyone agrees that we have negative and positive duties toward one another. Negative duties prohibit us from harming others, and positive duties require us to assist others when they are gravely imperiled and we can rescue them at no unreasonable cost to ourselves. In this chapter I have sought to show that each of these types of duty explains why we are morally bound to help those famine victims who are starving to death. The positive duty to provide easy rescues obligates us at the very least to send money to those international relief agencies which have assigned
themselves the task of ministering to those who are starving to death, and the negative duty not to benefit from an institution that wrongly harms others requires us to work to reform the current practice of international politics and business. In short, if you can make a positive difference without sacrificing anything morally significant, then you have a duty to do so. The proverbial operators are standing by at toll free numbers to accept your donation: CARE’s number is 1-800-521-2273; Oxfam America’s number is 1-800-693-2687; and UNICEF’s number is 1-800-367-5437 (Unger, 1996; p.175). It’s your call...

Notes

This chapter is inspired by, and draws heavily upon, the previous work of a number of authors, especially Peter Singer and Thomas Pogge. I am grateful to Andrew Altman and Hugh LaFollette for helpful comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

1 For the purposes of this chapter, I treat “insignificant costs” and “not unreasonable costs” as interchangeable. Readers familiar with Peter Singer’s landmark article, “Famine, affluence, and morality,” will recognize this language from Singer’s second, less demanding principle that we should contribute to famine relief until we sacrifice something “morally significant.” (I do not mean to defend Singer’s more demanding principle that we ought to contribute until we are sacrificing something “morally comparable.”)

2 “Positive” duties require us to assist others; they are to be contrasted with “negative” duties, which require merely that we not harm or interfere with others.

3 I do not deny that one might have more robust responsibilities to one’s compatriots, which require merely that we not harm or interfere with others.

4 One reason that you may be less motivated to make the call than to personally save the drowning child is because the former act would be less public. Thus, whereas you would be publicly applauded for diving in to save the drowning child and perhaps condemned for failing to do so, your relatively private decision to call the bartender need not have these same social consequences. But, while these types of considerations can no doubt affect one’s motivations, they are clearly irrelevant to what morality requires. To see this, notice that we might have much less motivation to refrain from murdering an enemy when we do so in private without any social repercussions, but clearly this does not mean that our moral duty against clandestine murder is any less weighty.

5 Indeed, not only does each imperiled person have no right that you save her in particular, it is not clear that the most gravely imperiled have a right that you help someone who is at least as imperiled. If (as some argue) we can sometimes make a greater moral difference by contributing to those who are less imperiled, then it would not seem objectionable to do so.

6 A similar objection is that we should not all give our money away to save foreigners because this would ruin our national economy and, as a consequence, render us unable to help other foreigners (or perhaps even our compatriots) in the future. This objection need not be taken seriously. It is true that our economy depends upon a certain amount of spending, but this would counsel us against saving too much, not against spending our money on others. More importantly, the dire economic consequences invoked in this objection could only come to fruition if the great majority of us gave considerably more than the $100 I am advocating here. In short, there are many things about which it is legitimate to worry, but excessive altruism to foreigners is not among them.

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I should stress that this is separate from the Samaritan duty. Samaritan duties are positive (as is the general duty to make the world a more just place), but the duty to refrain from either supporting or benefiting from injustice is a negative one.

There is also considerable evidence that extreme poverty and various problems tied to population growth are directly related to the standing of women. Societies that give women control over their bodies as well as access to education, economic opportunities, and reproductive technologies tend to have reduced birth rates and higher standards of living.

Of course, buying natural resources is only one of the more obvious ways in which the international community can help a dictator strengthen his domination over a population. As Thomas Pogge explains: “Local elites can afford to be oppressive and corrupt, because, with foreign loans and military aid, they can stay in power even without popular support. And they are often so oppressive and corrupt, because it is, in the light of the prevailing extreme international inequalities, far more lucrative for them to cater to the interests of foreign governments and firms than to those of their impoverished compatriots. Examples abound. There are, in the poor countries, plenty of governments that came to power and/or stay in power only thanks to foreign support. And there are plenty of politicians and bureaucrats who, induced or even bribed by foreigners, work against the interests of their people: for the development of a tourist-friendly sex industry (whose forced exploitation of children and women they tolerate and profit from), for the importation of unneeded, obsolete, or overpriced products at public expense, for the permission to import hazardous products, wastes, or productive facilities, against laws protecting employees or the environment, etc.” (2002: 244).

One might protest that, while an illegitimate ruler undeniably has no right to her country’s natural resources, neither do her compatriots. According to this objection, the world’s natural resources are owned jointly by all of the world’s population. I will not contest this claim here. Rather, I suggest that if everyone is equally entitled to the world’s natural resources, then this constitutes an argument in favor of something like a “global resources dividend.” This dividend, recommended by Pogge, would be paid for by those of us who use the world’s natural resources and would be owed to the world’s poor who are involuntarily not using their share of these natural resources (Pogge, 2002: 196–215).

Let me be clear: I am NOT alleging that Afl, Starbucks, Domino’s, Sprint, and MTV are particularly corrupt companies; each may do absolutely nothing immoral on its own. My point is that companies like these are part of an international system that benefits from the inexpensive natural resources purchased from undemocratic, illegitimate rulers.

Notice how awkward it is to protest that those of us who are privileged cannot be obligated to change the system because we are impotent in the face of its enormity, while simultaneously suggesting that those who are starving to death are entitled to no assistance because they are responsible for the political and economic institutions which led to their ruin.

References

Bread for the World Institute: (www.bread.org).


Christopher Heath Wellman
Further reading


