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DUTIES TO THE DISTANT: AID, ASSISTANCE, AND INTERVENTION IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD

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ABSTRACT. In his classic article, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” (*Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972), pp. 229–243), Peter Singer claimed that affluent people in the developed world are morally obligated to transfer large amounts of resources to poor people in the developing world. For present purposes I will not call Singer’s argument into question. While people can reasonably disagree about exactly how demanding morality is with respect to duties to the desperate, there is little question in my mind that it is much more demanding than common sense morality or our everyday behavior suggests. Even someone who disagrees with this might still find some interest in seeing what a demanding morality would imply for well-off residents of the rich countries of the world. I proceed in the following way. First, I survey humanitarian aid, development assistance, and intervention to protect human rights as ways of discharging duties to the desperate. I claim that we should be more cautious about such policies than is often thought. I go on to suggest two principles that should guide our actions, based on an appreciation of our roles, relationships, and the social and political context in which we find ourselves.

KEY WORDS: development, famine, intervention, poverty, Peter Singer

1. INTRODUCTION

In his classic article, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” Peter Singer claimed that affluent people in the developed world are morally obligated to transfer large amounts of resources to poor people in the developing world.¹ He derived this conclusion from two principles, both of which he believed are backed by the authority of common sense. The first principle is “that suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.”² The second is that “if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without

¹ Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1(1972), pp. 229–243.

² Singer, “Famine, Affluence and Morality,” p. 231.

thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought morally to do it.”³

Peter Unger has estimated (conservatively, he thinks) that donating \$200 to UNICEF or OXFAM will save the life of a child.⁴ \$200 does not go very far when it comes to buying new clothes, and some couples spend that much for opera tickets, seats at a Rolling Stones concert, or a fancy dinner in a trendy restaurant. Clearly, these goods are not of comparable moral importance to saving the life of a child. Even a weaker principle, one that requires us to prevent something bad from happening so long as we do not sacrifice “anything morally significant,” appears to have similar consequences, since new clothes, fancy dinners, and concerts do not appear to be morally significant goods.⁵ It appears that we should be prepared to sacrifice quite a lot by way of such luxury goods in order to save lives.

Singer demonstrates the urgency of our duty with the following analogy. Suppose that “I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning ... I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing.”⁶

For those of us who can afford concert tickets and restaurant meals, donating \$200 to OXFAM is equivalent to getting our clothes muddy. The fact that the child who would be saved by our donation is distant or not personally known to us does not relieve us of the obligation to act. What matters is that lives can effectively be saved simply by donating to organizations such as OXFAM. The duty to transfer these resources is not a matter of charity or supererogatory behavior, but of moral obligation.

There are questions, Singer admits, about the conditions under which aid is efficacious, and he grants that if for some reason such aid would not save lives, or paradoxically would produce more suffering, then we have no obligation to engage in such transfers. However, he regards these concerns as “more practical than philosophical”; they do not touch his conclusion about what morality demands.⁷

³ Singer, “Famine, Affluence and Morality,” p. 231.

⁴ Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 136–139.

⁵ I would challenge this view in a fuller exposition but, even so, Singer’s central claim would emerge unscathed.

⁶ Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” p. 231.

⁷ Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” p. 239.

The present paper is almost wholly “practical.” I make no apology for this since, as Singer writes, “[W]hat is the point of relating philosophy to public...affairs if we do not take our conclusions seriously?”⁸ We act in the world and not (only) in some conceptual ether. Addressing these “practical” questions is part of taking our conclusions seriously.

For present purposes I will not call Singer’s argument into question. While people can reasonably disagree about exactly how demanding morality is with respect to duties to the desperate, there is little question in my mind that it is much more demanding than common sense morality or our everyday behavior suggests. Even someone who disagrees with this might still find some interest in seeing what a demanding morality would imply for well-off residents of the rich countries of the world.

I proceed in the following way. First, I survey humanitarian aid, development assistance, and intervention to protect human rights as ways of discharging duties to the desperate. I claim that we should be more cautious about such policies than is often thought. I go on to suggest two principles that should guide our actions, based on an appreciation of our roles, relationships, and the social and political context in which we find ourselves.

2. HUMANITARIAN AID

“Famine, Affluence, and Morality” was written in response to an immediate humanitarian crisis. In November 1971, the confluence of war, poverty, and natural disaster had created nine million refugees in East Bengal, and Singer was appealing for immediate life-saving aid.

Such appeals became increasingly common throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and reached their peak in response to the Ethiopian famine of 1983–1985. On 7 October 1984, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) broadcast horrific images from a refugee camp in Korem, Ethiopia, showing dying children and starving women as far as the eye could see. The voiceover by Michael Buerk characterized the scene as “a Biblical famine – now in the twentieth century...the closest thing to hell on earth.”⁹ The Irish rock musician, Bob Geldof,

⁸ Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” p. 242.

⁹ As quoted in Jenny Edkins, *Whose Hunger? Concepts of Famine, Practices of Aid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 108.

immediately rushed into the studio with an all star line-up to record “Do They Know It’s Christmas.” The record sold nearly 4 million copies in the United Kingdom alone, and was quickly followed by “We Are the World,” produced by Quincy Jones, in the United States. Geldof went on to organize the LiveAid concert the following July, which was broadcast simultaneously from London and Philadelphia, and viewed by 1.5 billion people around the world. The records and concert ultimately raised between \$100 and \$500 million for famine relief in Africa.

These celebrity-driven, media-centered projects were valuable for a number of reasons. They created awareness of suffering in Africa, motivated people to act, and raised large sums of money. However, these events also contributed to creating some important misconceptions about the causes, consequences, and context of the suffering which they highlighted.

We can call the picture of humanitarian aid that emerged from these events the “LiveAid Conception.” On this view, humanitarian aid is a response to the immediate needs of innocent people (primarily women and children), whose lives are threatened by hunger as a consequence of an anomalous event (typically a natural disaster such as a drought). This picture invites a strong sympathetic response: “there but for fortune...” However, in many respects the LiveAid Conception is at odds with most recent understandings of such events. This conception decontextualizes, depoliticizes, and dehistoricizes famine, as well as masking the victims’ agency.

Famine has a history: it is not simply a series of random occurrences, caused by nature, that happen to strike unfortunate people. Over the last century famine occurred on almost every continent, but within that period there was a dramatic movement towards isolating famine, first to Asia and Africa, then to Africa alone. While in recent years famine has occurred in North Korea, and food insecurity has increased in parts of the Middle East, Central Asia, and perhaps India, Africa remains famine’s epicenter.

Increasingly, famine is seen as a dramatic moment in a process that almost always involves war, vulnerability, systematic violations of human rights, and radically unequal power relationships.¹⁰

¹⁰ There is quite a lot to say about each of these phenomena, perhaps especially vulnerability. Ecological degradation is often overlooked as a dimension of vulnerability. For a convenient way into the literature of vulnerability, see James Lewis, *Development in Disaster-Prone Places: Studies of Vulnerability* (London: Intermediate Technology, 1999).

Extreme natural events such as droughts or cyclones may be the proximate causes, but without these other conditions famine almost never occurs. In addition to taking a terrible toll of its own, war is now seen as almost essential to famine and to complex humanitarian emergencies generally.

From 1990–2000, two million children died in wars, three times the total number of American soldiers killed throughout history. In twentieth century wars it was generally safer to be a soldier than a civilian. Since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 established the modern state system, about 150 million people have been killed by their own governments. Indeed, it is civil wars, rather than wars against external enemies, that are most often implicated in famine. The Ethiopian famine of the early 1980s should be seen in this light.

Most scholars now agree that the main cause of the famine was not drought, but the government's policy of forcible resettlement, a policy used as a tactic in its war against secessionist rebels.¹¹ As part of a commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the famine, a diverse group of officials, activists, and academics gathered in Addis Ababa, and at the end of the meeting issued a communique which began: "[T]he 1984–1985 famine was in fact a political crisis characterized more appropriately by war than by drought."¹²

Other aspects of the LiveAid conception are misleading as well. While many of the victims of famine and other humanitarian emergencies are women and children, statistics suggest that men and adolescents are more at risk.¹³ Females may be less vulnerable because they store more body weight than males. Famines also lead to declines in fertility, thus lowering rates of maternal mortality. Perhaps the BBC documentarians saw a sea of women and children at Korem because the men had migrated to seek employment or had already succumbed.

Most famine victims die of disease rather than literally starving to death. Displacement and the breakdown in systems of water supply and waste disposal lead to increased exposure to disease. A compromised nutritional status leads to increased susceptibility. Together they result in epidemics of diarrhea, gastro-enteritis, dysentery, and other infectious diseases.

¹¹ David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), pp. 39–40.

¹² As quoted in Edkins, *Whose Hunger?*, p. 6.

¹³ Stephen Devereux, *Famine in the Twentieth Century*, Working Paper 105, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK, p. 11.

Nor are those who suffer in famines always passive victims struck down by the fickle finger of fate. They are often agents in highly complex political struggles. Those who suffered most in the Ethiopian famine of 1983–1985 were members of ethnic groups hostile to the government or involved in the civil war. Many of the Hutus dying in the refugee camps in Zaire from 1994–1996 were implicated in the 1994 genocide directed at the Tutsis. Elements of the Kosovar community, forcibly expelled from Serbia in 1998–1999, had been involved in attacks on government officials for more than a decade in deliberate attempts to provoke a Serbian reaction that would lead to international intervention – a tactic that succeeded.

Widespread acceptance of the LiveAid Conception can have important consequences. The quick disillusionment of the US public with the Somalian intervention after the “Blackhawk down” incident in 1991 was related to the way the intervention had been framed: The Somali people were starving in a famine caused by drought, and the US was there to help feed them. No wonder many in the US were angry and bewildered when their well-meaning soldiers were killed and their bodies dragged through the streets.

Singer’s analogy of the drowning child in the pond mirrors the LiveAid Conception. We have no idea of the history, context, and politics surrounding the situation that we confront. Whose child is this? How did the child get into the pond? What is likely to happen to the child once she or he is saved? While the answers to these questions are unlikely to alter the fact that we ought to save the child,¹⁴ they affect the meaning and significance of our action.

Moreover, a further question can be asked.

What if, every day, as Singer walks past the pond, fifty children were close to drowning? Every day, he takes his self-imposed obligation seriously, and spends the day rescuing them, abandoning his lectures. Princeton gets wind of this and does not share his ethical orientation. Now it is one thing to expect someone to save a drowning child and give up one lecture, but it is quite another—if there are tens or thousands drowning (or starving, or ill) everyday—to expect him to devote himself to being a lifeguard instead of a teacher.¹⁵

Since rich people in affluent countries are only a thin veneer on a global population that largely lives in poverty (about one-sixth

¹⁴ If we were certain that the child would grow up to be an Adolf Hitler or a Charles Manson, that would be a different matter.

¹⁵ This question is raised by Andrew Kuper, “More Than Charity: Cosmopolitan Alternatives to the ‘Singer Solution,’” *Ethics and International Affairs* 16 (2002), p. 110.

compared to one-half), this latter scenario which requires repeated acts of life-saving is in fact a more apt analogy than Singer's original "one off" example.

Reflecting the persistent ubiquity of global misery, humanitarian assistance has become an industry rather than a temporary response to isolated disasters in distant lands. \$66 billion per year is spent on humanitarian assistance programs, including about 10% of the foreign aid budget of the US. There are sites around the world where humanitarian assistance has been continuously delivered for decades, with no end in sight (e.g., some Palestinian refugee camps). In such cases, rather than providing temporary life-saving aid, humanitarian assistance has become the *de facto* policy of a world that is unwilling to take decisive action to address the underlying causes of global poverty.

In the summer of 2003, millions of Ethiopians were again at risk from famine, and *The New York Times* was once again blaming nature, asserting that "[D]rought is the primary reason Ethiopians go hungry."¹⁶ Yet a report from Save the Children and the Institute for Development Studies claims that:

Almost 20 years on from the Ethiopian famine that captured the imagination and generosity of the world, millions of people in the historically famine-prone north-eastern highlands of Ethiopia are worse off and more vulnerable than ever...Ethiopia is now chronically dependent on food aid...[I]ncreasing volumes of... international assistance to meet emergency appeals and annual food deficits cannot be a substitute for addressing the underlying causes of chronic food insecurity.¹⁷

Statistics underline this point. In 1984 the average annual income in Ethiopia was \$190; today it is \$108. Each year the population increases by 2.7% while the same percentage of topsoil is lost. A recent Christian Aid report blames structural problems such as "the decline in people's assets, collapse of livelihoods and lack of infrastructure...not simply drought, for creating vulnerability to starvation."¹⁸ The report goes on to say that "food aid is not the answer."

It is difficult to believe that our duties to the distant poor are exhausted simply by contributing to programs that keep them alive from one crisis to another. Certainly the opera fans among us would hope that sacrificing our tickets would produce more far-reaching

¹⁶ 28 July 2003; available on the web at <http://www.cindybeads.com/famine.htm>.

¹⁷ <http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/0/4b99bcc13144b864c1256d660057dee8?OpenDocument> (accessed 4 October 2003).

¹⁸ <http://www.christian-aid.org.uk/indepth/0302ethio/fallback.htm> (accessed 4 October 2003).

benefits. Instead of saving a child everyday at the cost of missing a lecture and dampening our clothes, it would be far better to prevent these children from falling into the pond in the first place. Providing humanitarian aid is at best a small part of what we should do to address the plight of the poor. It is not the solution to global poverty.

3. DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

The solution, it might be thought, is development assistance. In the words of an old adage, “if you give a man a fish he will eat for a day, but if you teach him how to fish he will never be hungry.” Ethiopia is a good example of the world’s failure to act on this insight. While it has received more relief aid in the past 20 years than any other country, it has received very little development aid, even compared to other poor countries.

In the postscript to “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” Singer endorses the idea that providing development assistance is one way we might discharge our duties to the poor. He writes that such assistance “is usually the better long-term investment.”¹⁹

The distinction between development assistance and humanitarian aid is not sharp, and any attempt to draw such a distinction can be challenged. For present purposes let us consider humanitarian aid to be resources provided in order to relieve immediate suffering, and development assistance as resources provided in order to reduce poverty over the long-term.

In recent years a body of literature has developed challenging the effectiveness of development aid.²⁰ What is striking about this literature is that much of it has been produced by people in the development community, who care deeply about poverty reduction. The main charges are that the funds provided are typically spent inefficiently in ways that benefit special interests rather than the poor; that there is little empirical evidence that development assistance actually

¹⁹ Peter Singer, “Famine Affluence and Morality,” in W. Aiken and H. La Follette (eds.) *World Hunger and Moral Obligation*, First Edition (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1977), p. 35.

²⁰ This literature includes the following: Thomas W. Dichter, *Despite Good Intentions: Why Development Assistance to the Third World Has Failed* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003); M. Maren, *The Road to Hell: The Ravaging Effects of Foreign Aid and International Charity* (New York: Free Press, 1997). An older but very influential work, is P. T. Bauer, *Equality, the Third World, and Economic Delusion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

contributes significantly to development; and that there are good theoretical reasons for supposing that development is a multi-dimensional, historical process, which cannot be jump-started by development assistance.

The first point can be illustrated by some statistics. The US spent \$30.4 billion on foreign aid between 1948 and the mid-1950s, of which 77% went to suppliers in the US.²¹ In the late 1990s the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) reaffirmed that about the same percentage of US aid was still being used to purchase U.S. goods and services. In a 2002 report (that subsequently has been removed from its website), USAID stated that

[T]he principal beneficiary of America's foreign assistance programs has always been the United States. Close to 80 percent of the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID's) contracts and grants go directly to American firms. Foreign assistance programs have helped create major markets for agricultural goods, created new markets for American industrial exports and meant hundreds of thousands of jobs for Americans.²²

This should not be surprising since US federal law specifies more than forty distinct missions for USAID, ranging from disposing of US agricultural surpluses to strengthening US land grant colleges and universities.²³ While the US is extreme in using foreign assistance programs to benefit domestic political constituencies, it is not alone. In 2001 roughly 40% of all international aid flows were tied to providing such benefits to donors.²⁴ Perhaps the most egregious example is provided by *Guardian* columnist, George Monbiot. He writes that Britain's Department for International Development gives more money to the right-wing Adam Smith Institute in consultancy fees than it does to such countries as Liberia and Somalia.²⁵ Even NGOs have become part of this self-serving system through their increasing dependency on government funding. From 1973–1986 the USAID share of the budgets of US NGOs went from 5 to 20%.

²¹ Cited in Dichter, *Despite Good Intentions*, p. 56.

²² United States Agency for International Development, "Direct Economic Benefits of US Assistance Programs (By State)." As of this writing (May, 2004), a fragment of the report including this quotation, can be found on the web at <http://www.professionalserve.com/CovenantBK/usaaid-my.htm>.

²³ United States Agency for International Development, p. 188.

²⁴ <http://www.cgdev.org/rankingtherich/home.html> (accessed 4 October 2003).

²⁵ George Monbiot, "On the Edge of Lunacy," Tuesday, 6 January 2004; available on the web at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Columnists/Column/0,5673,1116884,00.html>.

Development aid has many purposes, but to a great extent, it is intended to help donors rather than the recipients of aid. Thus it is not surprising that such aid is not spent efficiently when viewed from the perspective of poverty reduction. Poverty reduction is only one of its aims, and in some countries, it is the aim with the weakest political constituency.

Those who benefit from the present system, both donors and recipients, have strong incentives to maintain it. Although development assistance is low compared to other capital flows (a tiny fraction of 1% of global GDP), these funds can be extremely important to particular recipients. For example, according to figures from the mid-1990s, Burkino Faso received 98% of its annual government budget in development assistance, Laos about 80%, Nepal about 50%, Ethiopia about 25%, and Kenya about 15%. Haiti received twice its government's annual budget in development assistance.²⁶

Moreover, development aid is not primarily distributed on the basis of need. Together, Russia and Israel receive more than 20% of US development aid, and large sums are increasingly being spent in relatively well-off countries such as Bosnia and Iraq, while the needs of Africa continue to be ignored. Taken together, only 19% of all development aid goes to the 43 least developed countries.²⁷ The incentives run strong and deep for various parties to continue these flows, even if the plight of the poor is not being substantially improved.

Once the complex, mixed purposes of development aid are understood, it is not surprising that there is little empirical evidence that it has substantially improved the welfare of the poor. A recent report from the Commonwealth Secretariat claims that although more than \$1.2 trillion was spent on official development assistance between 1950 and 2000, the gap between the incomes of people in developed and developing countries has widened.²⁸ The 2002 report from the

²⁶ <http://www.cgdev.org/rankingtherich/home.html> (accessed October 4, 2003). In view of the latter statistic, it is not surprising that the suspension of aid by the US and the European Union in 2000 ultimately brought about the collapse of the government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

²⁷ As cited in Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), p. 8. For documentation and more recent data, see Bob Bauleh, "Aid for the Poorest? The Distribution and Maldistribution of International Development Assistance," Working Paper 35, Chronic Poverty Research Centre, September 2003 (available on the web at <http://www.chronicpoverty.org/pdfs/Aid%20for%20the%20Poorest-%20WP35.pdf>).

²⁸ As reported at <http://www.id21.org/society/s9bpm1g1.html> (accessed 4 October 2003).

United Nations Development Programme shows that more than 60 countries are poorer today than they were a decade ago. Indeed, in the 3 years since the United Nations adopted its eight Millennium Development Goals, the first of which is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, the number of people living on less than a dollar per day in sub-Saharan Africa has increased from 315 to 404 million.²⁹

At best, such macroeconomic data are only suggestive about the aggregate effects of development aid, and it is certainly true that at least some development projects benefit poor people. It may also be the case that poor people generally would be even worse off without development aid than they are now. Still, it is difficult to be certain, since little has been done by way of meaningful evaluation.³⁰ Both Singer and Thomas Pogge admit that development aid is often ineffective in reducing poverty, and then go on to argue that we ought to work harder to make it more effective.³¹ However, this response fails to address seriously the fact that rather than failing, development aid may well be succeeding in realizing the goals of both donors and recipients. Development assistance may not lift up the poor, but there is little reason to believe that this was ever its primary purpose. If this is correct, then there is little reason to be optimistic about changing the present system, which is succeeding in its own terms, so as to make development assistance more effective in reducing poverty.

Moreover, there is some reason to believe that, even at its best, development aid will largely be irrelevant to development. While it is difficult to name a single country for which development aid has been crucial for stimulating development, there are many countries that have successfully developed without substantial aid.³² The most

²⁹ id21News Number 121, March 2004.

³⁰ Leif Wenar, "What We Owe to Distant Others," *Politics, Philosophy, and Economics* 2 (2003), pp. 283–304, makes a lot of this point and recommends that development projects be subject to much more extensive evaluation. I am not enthusiastic about this proposal since such evaluation is intrinsically difficult to do, and attempts at evaluation carry their own costs and can also distort incentives. On this point, see Lisa Bornstein, "Management Standards and Development Practice in the South African Aid Chain," *Public Administration and Development* 23 (2003), pp. 393–404.

³¹ Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*; Peter Singer, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

³² There is no question that the Marshall Plan was important in helping the countries of Western Europe to restore their economies after World War II, but this challenge was profoundly different from that currently faced by the poor countries of the world which have no history of economic development.

obvious examples are China, and the “Asian tigers.” In 1950 these countries were poorer than some African and Latin American countries, yet they took off despite relatively low levels of development assistance. The reasons for this are complex and not well-understood, but there is an emerging view that development is more strongly related to culture and total investment than to aid. At most, development aid provides 30% of investment capital in developing countries. Remittances and private funds provide the remainder. While these private flows can be highly unstable, the “Asian tigers” benefited greatly from overseas workers remitting their earnings and providing investment capital, as well as from maintaining a generally favorable investment climate.

Thus far I have treated development and poverty reduction as interchangeable, yet many would claim that various cultural, non-economic factors are part of the very notion of development. Sustainability, democracy, capabilities, and women’s rights have all received a great deal of attention in recent years. Although I cannot discuss these concerns in detail here, it is an interesting question to what extent they can be taken up in an expansive conception of human rights. While there is disagreement about what exactly a full system of human rights consists in – whether, for example, all the rights listed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights really count as rights – there is substantial agreement about what constitutes the core of human rights.³³ Whether or not implementing such a system is part of development or conducive to development, it is clearly very important indeed. Some groups in the humanitarian community, for example the US branch of Médecins du Monde, have gone so far as to explicitly characterize themselves as human rights groups.³⁴

In his recent work Singer has emphasized the importance of promoting a global human rights agenda through international action.³⁵ He has gone so far as to say that “the last line of defense against genocide and similar crimes must be law enforcement...and where other methods of achieving that fail, the method of last resort will be military intervention.”³⁶

³³ On this point, see James Nickel, *Making Sense of Human Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

³⁴ Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, p. 219.

³⁵ Singer, *One World*.

³⁶ Singer, *One World*, p. 12.

4. HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION

Concern with human rights has been growing since at least the end of World War II, but it was in the fires of Rwanda and Bosnia that this concern became welded to the idea of military intervention. At a news conference at the height of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, Philippe Biberson, president of Médecins sans Frontières – France, called for military intervention, declaring that “[O]ne cannot halt a massacre with medicines.”³⁷ Many in the humanitarian community praised the NATO intervention in Kosovo, even though it did not have UN authorization. For many theorists, both on the right and the left, humanitarian intervention directed towards the promotion of human rights has seemed to be the fullest expression of our duties to the distant.

However, there are serious dangers in supporting military intervention, even for the purpose of promoting human rights. What armies do very well is to kill people and smash things; what they are not is humanitarian organizations. On occasion military intervention may create space in which human rights and development can be pursued, but such intervention does not in itself promote these values. Even Michael Ignatieff, a liberal supporter of humanitarian intervention, has written, “[I]ntervention, rather than reinforcing respect for human rights, is consuming their legitimacy, both because our interventions are unsuccessful and because they are inconsistent.”³⁸

Second, when humanitarian organizations become complicit in military adventures, this creates conflicts and dilemmas for organizations whose stated goals are to relieve suffering, whomever the victims and whatever the causes. Beginning with the wars in the Balkans and continuing with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the humanitarian community has become increasingly identified with one side or another in military conflicts. This has led to an erosion of credibility on the ground and increasingly acrimonious debate within agencies.³⁹ Moreover, when humanitarian agencies join forces with governments and militaries, it is difficult to avoid

³⁷ As quoted in Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, p. 167.

³⁸ Michael Ignatieff, *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 39.

³⁹ See Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*; and Maren, *The Road to Hell*. Many of these debates are covered on www.alertnet.org.

having their priorities shaped by these vastly more powerful institutions.⁴⁰

A recent report by the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies focuses on ethics in aid, and raises many important concerns.⁴¹ The authors worry especially that when powerful nations decide to go to war in countries with vulnerable populations, this leads to a massive mobilization of humanitarian resources in an attempt to mitigate the possible consequences, often to the neglect of far more serious and long-standing humanitarian emergencies. They point out that in April, 2003, at the same time that donors were pledging \$1.7 billion in relief and reconstruction aid for Iraq, there was a billion dollar shortfall in funds pledged to the World Food Program to avert starvation among 40 million Africans in 22 countries. Such responses appear contrary to the code of conduct subscribed to by the International Federation, along with many of the largest NGOs, that rejects acting as instruments of government foreign policy and setting priorities on any other basis than need. Indeed, some humanitarian organizations have at various times been complicit in denying aid to Afghans, Serbs, and Hutus (for example) as a way of punishing the political leaderships of their communities.

Even more important, in the current climate it is difficult to support humanitarian intervention without signing up for the imperial project emanating from Washington. The US government has made clear its intention to remake the Middle East, and perhaps the world, in an image that is more consonant with what they take to be US values. Two recent news stories indicate the depth of this commitment.

Thomas Friedman, one of the leading liberal supporters of humanitarian intervention, writes that “we are not ‘rebuilding’ Iraq. We are ‘building’ a new Iraq.” He quotes approvingly Colonel Ralph Baker, who oversees two Baghdad districts.

First we taught them how to run a meeting. We had to teach them how to have an agenda. So instead of having this sort of group dialogue with no form, which is what they were used to, you now see them in council meetings raising their hands to speak.

⁴⁰ For discussion of these issues, see *The Future of Humanitarian Action: Implications of Iraq and Other Recent Crises* (Feinstein International Famine Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University), available on the web at <http://hwproject.tufts.edu/pdf/Humanitarian.mapping.final.report.jan14.pdf>

⁴¹ Jonathan Walter (ed.), *World Disaster Report 2003* (Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, 2003).

They get five minutes per member. It's basic PTA stuff. We've taught them how to motion ideas and to vote on them.⁴²

Another example of how totalizing the US project can be comes from Bosnia where, to a great extent, the military intervention simply froze an ethnic civil war in place rather than resolving the fundamental conflicts. The status of the town of Brcko was so disputed that in the Dayton Accords of 1995 it was decided that it would be administered directly by a US supervisor. It benefited from a disproportionate amount of US aid, and Brcko now has the highest per capita income in Bosnia. It is considered the shining success story of Bosnian reconstruction. It is the only town in which Muslim, Serb, and Croat children are mandated to go to school together. The history curriculum ends with World War II, and the schools emphasize mathematics and computers. The US supervisor imposed the school integration law, and has annulled other laws, as well as sacking local officials and businessmen who are seen as divisive or troublesome. Local elections have not taken place, so as to not endanger the progress that has been made (though they are now scheduled for October, 2004).

This new imperial project raises two related questions: First, is it just? And second, is it likely to succeed?

With respect to justice, many people would want to contrast this new imperialism with the old imperialism of the British Empire. The new imperialism is undertaken for humanitarian purposes; the old imperialism was about enriching the motherland. But this view paints too benign a picture of the new imperialism, and is too cynical about the old.

The great public justifications for British imperialism were the abolition of the slave trade and the spread of civilization, which was closely identified with Christianity. In 1807 the British abolished the slave trade and by 1816 they were patrolling the West coast of Africa claiming the right to board slave ships, though some might have thought them guilty of arrogance and hypocrisy since slavery was not abolished in the British Empire itself until 1833. The abolition of slavery was the ostensible focus of the Congress of Berlin in 1884–1885, which effectively divided up Africa among the European powers. When in 1896 the British forces were moving up the Niger River and occupying areas of Northern Nigeria, a popular weekly magazine (“The Globe”) printed a picture of Islamic princes swearing

⁴² “Starting from Scratch,” *New York Times*, 27 August 2003, p. A21.

on the Koran that they would renounce slavery. The caption said, "Here we see our civilizing mission in action bringing civilization to the less fortunate."⁴³ Slavery continued to be a justification for British incursions into the Muslim world up to the 1920s.

These days we have a difficult time believing that the promoters of the old imperial project were sincere in their beliefs. But even the great utilitarian philosopher, John Stuart Mill, said that British rule in India was "not only the purest in intention but one of the most beneficent in act ever known to mankind."⁴⁴ The more businesslike Cecil Rhodes defined colonialism as "philanthropy plus five percent."⁴⁵ If this were really the case it would be a pretty good deal for all concerned.

From the perspective of the twenty-first century, the old imperialism appears to be a moral disaster (though not an unmixed one), whose consequences continue to haunt the world. In a masterful study of the Great Lakes region in central Africa, the French historian Jean Pierre Chretien has shown how the roots of the Rwandan genocide lie not in ancient hatreds, but in destructive animosities stemming from the recent colonial past.⁴⁶ While there is a tendency in the US today to dismiss lessons that might be learned from the experience of old Europe, we would have to be very arrogant indeed to believe that our imperial project is necessarily better intentioned or more assured of success.

5. TAKING STOCK

I am not arguing that aid, assistance, or intervention in the developing world never do any good, are never justified, or should be abolished. What I am claiming is that we should have a great deal more humility than we do about saying when such actions are called for and what shape they should take. This is not only because there are questions about the efficiency of aid, but also because the

⁴³ Quoted by Lawrence James in an interview accessed at <http://www.pbs.org/empires/victoria/text/empirejames.html>.

⁴⁴ As quoted in Niall Ferguson, "America: An Empire in Denial," *The Chronicle Review*, 28 March 2003, available at <http://chronicle.com/free/v49/i29/29b00701.htm>.

⁴⁵ As quoted in Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, p. 60.

⁴⁶ Jean Pierre Chretien, *The Great Lakes of Africa: Two Thousand Years of History*, trans. Scott Strauss (Cambridge: Zone Books, 2003).

provision of aid creates winners and losers within societies that can lead to worse consequences overall. For example, one of the concerns of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies is that the arrival of over 350 international aid agencies in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban has driven up local rents, inflated salaries, and sucked away skilled, experienced Afghans from the government and vital public services. While a driver at the US Embassy in Kabul can now earn \$500 per month, a doctor in a government clinic receives about \$45. It is difficult to believe that aid that creates such perverse incentives can in the long run really benefit people.⁴⁷ Even more shocking is the claim by one aid worker that development aid strengthened the elements in Hutu society that instigated the genocide, at the expense of moderate Hutus and Tutsis.⁴⁸

Moreover, we should be reminded that the language of beneficence is not the sole property of liberal democracies bent on humanitarian missions. Benito Mussolini too claimed the abolition of slavery as a justification for the invasion of Ethiopia. Japan claimed that it was invading Manchuria to rescue it from Chinese bandits. Even Adolf Hitler claimed that he was putting an end to ethnic strife when he invaded the Sudetenland. Once the principle is accepted that a country may be invaded for the good of its own people, the flood-gates are open, especially if there is no requirement that such invasions be sanctioned by a legitimating international authority.⁴⁹

What then, should be the policy of those of us who believe with Singer that we have demanding and rigorous duties to the distant?

First, seek to make things better by trying to do no harm.⁵⁰ Rather than advocating ambitious agendas to remake the world, we should

⁴⁷ *World Disaster Report 2003*.

⁴⁸ Tony Vaux, "Aid Workers Still Grappling With Rwanda Demons," available at <http://www.alertnet.org/thefacts/reliefresources/108195149548.htm>. Amy Chua, *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability* (New York: Doubleday, 2003) has challenged the very idea that free markets and democracy are necessarily progressive forces, arguing instead that in many parts of the world they exacerbate ethnic conflict.

⁴⁹ Indeed, it can be questioned whether there is any such legitimating authority in the current international system. The United Nations Security Council claims such authority, but it is quite unrepresentative and undemocratic.

⁵⁰ Much of what I say in this paper is meant to be neutral among competing moral theories, but the idea that our duty is to bring about a better world rather than the best one is a view that I call "Progressive Consequentialism" and explore in an unpublished paper of the same title (co-authored with Robert Elliot).

focus first and primarily on challenging those structures that bring about and maintain global poverty. These include trade barriers imposed by the US and the EU, the appropriation of the global commons by the rich nations, and various policies of such international organizations as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. I will discuss these in turn.

Trade barriers take different forms including subsidies for domestic industries, tariffs, and quotas. According to the World Bank, developed country trade barriers cost developing countries more than twice what they receive in foreign aid. There are many striking examples of such barriers. Here is one: Government subsidies to the 25,000 US cotton farmers is greater than the entire economic output of Burkina Faso, a country in which two million people depend on cotton for their livelihoods.⁵¹

The appropriation of the global commons by the rich countries is illustrated by the problem of climate change. In fueling their development with the generous use of cheap fossil fuels, the rich countries have used the atmosphere as a sink for disposing of carbon dioxide. They have gathered most of the benefits of this intensive energy use, while the entire world must cope with the consequences of the climate change that is occurring as a result. Indeed, it is even worse than that. While everyone is at risk from the possibility of a catastrophic collapse of the current climate regime, it is poor people in poor countries who will suffer most even on the most optimistic scenarios. For they are most directly dependent on climate and therefore most vulnerable to the impacts of climatic events. They also have fewer resources for adapting to climate change. For example, rising sea levels will not damage Dutch farmers behind their system of protective dikes, but farmers in Bangladesh and Egypt will be devastated. The current global policy with respect to climate change can be characterized as an instance of the polluted pay principle: polluters benefit from their pollution, while those who suffer from the pollution bear the costs.⁵²

⁵¹ For more on trade barriers visit http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=24&page=0, and follow the links to the background papers. Days after I wrote these words the World Trade Organization declared U.S. cotton subsidies illegal. It is not yet clear what will be the final outcome of this case.

⁵² This idea is presented in "Climate Change and Global Environmental Justice," P. Edwards and C. Miller (eds.), *Changing the Atmosphere: Expert Knowledge and Global Environmental Governance* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 287–307, and further developed in my forthcoming paper, "Adaptation, Mitigation, and Justice."

The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, institutions effectively controlled by the rich countries of the North, have often imposed policies on developing countries that have left them worse off than they otherwise would have been. Again, many examples can be given. Consider Malawi, a country that became heavily indebted during the thirty year rule of the pro-Western dictator, Hasting Banda. Despite receiving debt reduction under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative, Malawi is still required to spend 29% of its national budget servicing the debt – more than is spent on health, education, and agriculture combined – this in a country in which 60% of the population lives below the poverty line and 20% are HIV positive. In 2001, conditionality imposed by the HIPC initiative swept away the system of subsidies, controlled prices, and state grain stores that had kept famine at bay in this chronically food insecure country. As a result, in 6 months, beginning in October, 2001, the price of maize increased by 400%, and hoarding and corruption became endemic. By March, 2002, Malawi had plunged into famine, yet was continuing to service its external debt.⁵³

There are many different kinds of actions that can be taken in attempts to refrain from causing harm, ranging from the very personal, such as buying “fair trade” products, to the political, such as supporting particular candidates. However, taking such actions, while extremely important, does not exempt us from directly transferring resources to the poor when we can be sure that the consequences will be good. It is in connection with this obligation that a second principle comes into play: “follow the money.” We need to act through networks and channels that are transparent enough to allow us to assess even the indirect and remote consequences of our actions. This may involve acting at multiple levels of social organization including through friends, colleagues, professional organizations, faith communities, sister city programs, and so on.

Together these two principles bring out an important point. Good intentions are not enough. The goal of our actions should be to improve the world, not to make us feel good about ourselves. Susan Sontag goes so far as to claim, perhaps paradoxically, that sympathizing with the poor can actually inhibit us from the hard work of

⁵³ Kwesi Owusu and Francis Ng’ambi, “Nature or the North: Who Is to Blame for Famine in Malawi,” available at <http://www.id21.org/zinter/id21zinter.exe?a=0&i=s5cko1g1&u=40899253>. See also <http://www.globalpolicy.org/socecon/develop/africa/2002/10wdm.htm>.

understanding our role in the production of distant horrors. She writes:

So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent – if not an inappropriate – response. To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering and may – in ways we might prefer not to imagine – be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others, is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only an initial spark.⁵⁴

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper I have accepted Singer's claim that we have a demanding and rigorous duty to aid the distant poor, but I have gone on to suggest that we should be modest and self-critical about our ability to discharge this duty successfully. However, rather than making us complacent about our duties, these claims should provoke us to recognize additional demands on our knowledge and attention. It is not enough to write checks in the hope that they will do some good; we must at least be sure that in doing so we will do no harm. And this, surprisingly, turns out to be a very demanding requirement.⁵⁵

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⁵⁴ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), pp. 102–103.

⁵⁵ This paper is greatly indebted, obviously, to the work of Peter Singer. I have also been influenced by conversations with Leif Wenar. Discussions with audiences at the University of Girona in Catalonia, Spain, and at the American Philosophical Association, Mini-Conference on Global Justice, in Pasadena, California, have helped to shape the final version.