



## World Hunger

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We are watching television, and an advertisement for UNICEF, OXFAM, or the Christian Children's Fund interrupts our favorite show. We grab our remotes and quickly flip to another channel. Perhaps we mosey to the kitchen for a snack. Maybe we just sit, trying not to watch. These machinations may banish these haunting images of destitute, starving children from our TVs and our thoughts, but they do not alter the brutal facts: millions of people in the world are undernourished; thousands die each day; most of those who suffer and die are children, and, with collective effort we could end the suffering of millions without too much strain.

At the same time, many of us talk as if we were nearly indigent. Relative to the rich in our society we may be financially strapped. But relative to most citizens of the world, we are awash with money. Given that, what, if anything, should we do, individually or collectively, to alleviate their suffering and save their lives? Most of us interpret this as asking: should we be charitable, and, if so, how charitable? That seems to be the guiding premise of organizations who implore us to send money: they tell us to open our hearts, to be generous, to give of ourselves, to help those in need. The character of their appeal reveals just how pervasive the "charity view" is. We think that although it would be nice of us to assist the starving, none of us is morally required to assist them—that we have done nothing (very) wrong if we ignore those strangers in need. Indeed, most people assume that if we help, then we are moral heroes.

There are those rare voices admonishing us to give, proclaiming that our failure to assist is not just tight-fisted, but positively wrong. Some of these will claim our obligation is based on a right of the starving to our assistance (Li 1996; Shue 1996), while others who claim we have strong obligations to assist will eschew rights talk because their preferred ethical theories do not countenance them (Singer 1996/1972). But all these thinkers emphatically reject the charity view. They aver that assisting the destitute is not a moral option but a moral requirement.

There are fewer still who declare that we have a positive obligation not to help, since assistance, according to their predictions, would not only prolong the hungry's misery, but increase the number of deaths (Hardin 1996/1974). Despite these differences, most advocates of each view frame the moral question similarly. They ask—as I did in the beginning—what, if anything, should the relatively affluent do

to aid the starving? Following the work of Drèze and Sen, an increasing number of scholars reject this formulation (Drèze and Sen 1989, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c; Sen 1981). These scholars state or imply that even asking this question in this way is a mistake—and likely a moral failing (Crocker 1997: 211).

The work of these developmental theorists is critical. It explains and illuminates features of world hunger not operative in the standard ways of framing the debate (e.g., in most essays featured in Aiken and LaFollette 1977). It illuminates the circumstances surrounding, and the causes of, both endemic and episodic hunger. It offers wise guidance about effective efforts to alleviate hunger. Thus, Drèze and Sen's work has significant moral and practical implications. However, these implications are neither as direct nor as immediate as some advocates think. Their work does not eliminate the need to address the standard moral questions. We must still ascertain whether and how those of us in relative affluence should morally respond to the brute facts of starvation—and to the conditions that create and sustain it. The claims of developmental ethics do not wipe away these questions; they merely require that we reframe them. But before we can correctly characterize the issues, we should first understand the standard options.

## The Basic Options

### *Charity*

Most people in the United States, and probably in the developed world, embrace the charity view in one of two incarnations. On one view being charitable is wholly voluntary, while on the other to whom we are charitable is wholly voluntary. According to the first variation, we have no duty of any kind to the needy (Hoenig 1999). According to the second, traceable to Kant, we have an *imperfect* duty to help people in need. However, although we ought to be charitable to some degree, there is no particular person we are obligated to assist, and certainly no particular person can expect, let alone demand, our assistance.

Despite their differences both views hold (a) that no particular person can demand or expect charity and (b) that governments cannot legitimately coerce us (e.g., via taxation) to be charitable (Narveson 2000: 317). Moreover, although the third view holds that we morally ought to be charitable, we can fulfill that imperfect duty without helping anyone who is starving. We could, instead, help the unemployed in our neighborhood, support a literacy program, or give to Planned Parenthood. Some who hold the third view might claim we are duty bound to meet greater needs before meeting less substantial ones. However, since there are pressing needs close to home, likely we could satisfy any imperfect duty of charity without helping any of the world's starving. Thus, on both charity views, people who fail to contribute to famine relief might be stingy or morally short-sighted, but they would not necessarily be immoral.

In this paper I will not directly discuss this alternative. I simply take it as the default position: I take it to be correct if no alternative can be defended. I will focus on the alternatives, although, in discussing them, I will indirectly address the charity view.

### *We Should not Aid the Starving*

Most of us think feeding the starving would be good even if it is something that we do not do. We think it is good because (a) we think it relieves human suffering and most accounts of morality hold that (b) relieving human suffering is at least permissible and perhaps morally required. Hardin disagrees. He thinks that (a) is false, and therefore concludes that we should not feed the starving.

Both the duty and the charity views, Hardin claims, assume that our ability to feed people is boundless. It is not. "A nation's land has a limited capacity to support a population and as the current energy crisis has shown us, in some ways we have already exceeded the carrying capacity of our land" (Hardin 1996/1974: 12). Given these limitations, some countries are like overcrowded lifeboats. Their land cannot support the current population—and certainly not future generations given current population growth rates. Although feeding these starving people may temporarily keep more of them alive, in the long run, it will increase the population to the point where we can no longer feed them, even if we wanted. That will increase suffering and endanger future generations. That is why assistance is morally wrong.

Here's an example to illustrate Hardin's point. At the time of Hardin's writing in the early 70s, India had a population of 650 million people. Despite the large number of people dying from starvation, its population was growing at a rate of 2.6% per year. At that rate, India's population would double every 27 years. The problem was even more acute in Colombia, Ecuador, and Pakistan which had annual population growth rates of greater than 3 percent. At that pace, their populations would double every 21 years. If those countries were unable to feed their current populations, how could they possibly feed a population twice or four times that size—even with massive assistance from more affluent nations? Hence, although our initial impulse is to feed the starving, we should not. We should recognize just "how wrong generosity can be" (Fletcher 1977: 105).

### *A Strong Obligation to Feed the Starving*

The claim that we have a strong obligation to assist the starving takes two broad forms, reflecting one's general theoretical framework. The first claims that we have a positive obligation to ease suffering and promote happiness; hence, we should assist the starving (Singer 1977/1972: 28). The second claims people have a right to food, and that right undergirds our obligation to assist them. Of course rights, absent compelling obligations or duties, are effectively empty (Pogge 2000). That is why even those who claim that people have rights to food will claim that the relatively affluent have a strong correlative positive obligation to assist those in need. Hence, although the distinction between these two positions is theoretically intriguing, and could well have *some* practical significance, for present purposes I will collapse them and simply talk about the strong obligation to assist the starving.

Those who claim the relatively affluent have this strong obligation must, among other things, show why Hardin's projections are either morally irrelevant or mistaken. A hearty few take the former tack: they claim we have a strong obliga-

tion to aid the starving even if we would eventually become malnourished. On this view, to survive on lifeboat earth, knowing that others were tossed overboard into the sea of starvation, would signify an indignity and callousness worse than extinction (Watson 1977). It would be morally preferable to die struggling to create a decent life for all than to continue to live at the expense of the starving. However, most who think we ought to feed the starving will claim, or imply, that *if* feeding the starving had the terrible consequences Hardin predicts, then we should not feed them (Singer 1977/1972: 34). Therefore, most who reject Hardin's neo-Malthusianism must show that the projected consequences are at least implausible, if not demonstrably wrong. To set the stage for showing that Hardin's views are wrong, I must first describe the developmental alternative.

## The Developmental Alternative

### *The Basic Idea*

Most discussions of world hunger state or imply that (a) starvation is caused by a shortage of food in a region, (b) which is itself usually caused by a natural disaster (drought, floods, etc.). Given these assumptions, we then ask: (c) what, if anything, should we morally do to help people escape the effects of the famine? If we assume someone should assist them (d) we must decide "*who* is responsible for providing this help" (McKinley 1981).

Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen argue that this way of framing the issue mistakenly treats hunger as a naturally induced phenomenon unconnected to the social, political, and economic institutions within which it arises (1989; 1991a; 1991b; 1991c). They claim this is a mistake—even when thinking about a farmer who owns her own land. The farmer's ability to obtain enough food depends not only on the size and quality of her land, a normal rainfall, and her hard work, but also on the actions of others. Will people living upstream dam up or pollute the water flowing through her land? Will they permit their animals to overgraze the land so there is no grass for hers? Will others sell her the supplies she needs: seed, animal feed, and farm equipment, etc.? Will others buy her products so she has money to buy the supplies she needs? Will they pay her a fair price? Will they assist her if some disaster interferes with her crop or prevents her from harvesting it? Unless these and other factors are satisfied, then all the land and hard work in the world will not suffice to feed her family. That is why when families lack adequate food, the reason may have little to do with the general availability of food in the area.

History supports this armchair reasoning. During the 1974 famine in Bangladesh, the amount of food per capita was the third highest during a ten-year period (Drèze and Sen 1989: 27). This finding was duplicated within the regions of the country worst hit by the famine. "One of the famine districts (Dinajpur) had the *highest* availability of food in the entire country, and indeed, all four of the famine districts were among the top five in terms of food availability per head" (*ibid.*, p. 28). The problem, Drèze and Sen explain, is that the families had insufficient "entitlements" to food. These "entitlements" are determined not

only by what the person can produce, but also what they can buy and what is made available to them (Sen 1981: 4).

This shows why we cannot determine the causes of either episodic or endemic hunger by simply asking whether the country's overall level of food has declined. We must determine whether the people have sufficient entitlements to food. Of course the overall availability of food is one factor determining people's entitlements (Drèze and Sen 1989: 25-9). Although some detractors claim it is the single most important factor (Bowbrick 1987), most researchers agree with Drèze and Sen that its significance is often overemphasized (Parikh 1991; Sobham 1991). I cannot resolve this debate here, although later arguments will have bearing on these empirical issues. However, even if food availability were the most important factor, it is not the only one. Whether a decline in overall food availability leads to starvation depends on a variety of social, political, and economic factors.

### *The Moral Implications*

This developmental perspective requires that we explore broader questions about the political, social, and economic relationships within and between countries. But this does not obviate the need to answer the moral question: what, if anything, should those of us in affluent nations do to help impoverished countries and individuals, especially those facing episodic or endemic hunger? It just slightly changes it. We should now ask: "Are we obliged to insure that they have adequate food entitlements?" That requires us to ask several derivative questions: do we have obligations to encourage (or coerce) their governments to enhance their entitlements? Are we obliged to establish ongoing trade relations with these countries to enhance their citizens' entitlements? Do we have obligations to send food or to help distribute food when the country cannot do so on its own? Although the developmental perspective does not resolve these moral questions, it has prescriptive implications. Minimally it obliterates any simple version of Hardin's argument. Conversely, seeing why Hardin's argument fails elucidates significant features of the developmental perspective.

Hardin claims that a country's ability to feed her people depends solely on its land's ability to produce sufficient food. Developmental theorists counter that the land's fertility is far less important than are her (a) internal economic and political strength and her (b) transnational economic and political agreements. These reveal how heavily dependent we are on others—both within and between countries. They show that no person and no country is wholly self-reliant. For example, while a few of the world's smallest and least prosperous countries import goods valued at only ten percent of their Gross National Products, the average country imports goods equivalent to one-fourth of its Gross National Product. Most European countries import goods valued at greater than one-third of their respective GNPs (United Nations Development Program 2000: 213). Although these countries do not directly feed their people, their people are nonetheless well fed. After all, they have material goods and human skills to trade for food and other essential goods.

Moreover, Hardin's projections, like those of Malthus before him, have turned out to be wildly mistaken. In the early 70s he projected that the world's population at the turn of the century would be 6.6 billion. It was, in fact, slightly more than

5.8 billion (United Nations Development Program 2000: 226). And India, which, according to Hardin, had a population growth rate of 2.6% in 1973, had a rate of 2% by the turn of the century; that is projected to decline to 1.2% by the year 2015 (United Nations Development Program 2000: 225). There are surely limits to how many people the land can support, but we are not approaching those limits at the breakneck speed Hardin claims.

It is not enough to know that his projections fail. It is crucial to understand why they fail. The explanation for their failure reveals significant facts about the nature of hunger, and suggests potent strategies for its control—if not eradication. Population trends are best explained by the “demographic transition theory,” (DTT) a sociological theory around since long before Hardin first advanced his views on hunger. According to one prominent formulation of DTT, population trends move through four distinct stages. In the first, the combination of a high birth rate and a high death rate produce a steady population. In the second stage, death rates decline while birth rates remain high, leading to high population growth rates. In the third, birth rates decline more rapidly than death rates; consequently, population rates increase but at a much slower pace. In the final stage, population becomes stable as low birth rates parallel low death rates. We have long since past the first stage, and the declining population rates worldwide suggest that most of the world has passed the peak of the second stage. Even those undeveloped countries still in the second stage are ambling toward the third, while countries in the highly developed West are already comfortably settled into the fourth. In these later stages population growth rates stabilize even while death rates decline. That shows that we need not “let ‘em starve” to control population growth. General economic development can propel countries into these latter stages in which people have no reason to have large families and heightened reason to have smaller ones (Heer 1975: 13-4).

Although it does not explain all perturbations in population, as a general description of population changes (Caldwell 1997). The demographic transition theory is both theoretically plausible and it squares with the empirical data. Its theoretical plausibility is clear: impoverished people have strong incentives to have large families, especially in countries with poor medical care. In an environment with high infant mortality rates, people can reasonably expect to have surviving children only by having many of them. Having more children means having more hands to feed the family, either by working in the fields, or working in neighboring cities to supplement the family income. They are also the aged person’s only source of income in countries without a social security program.

Conversely, relatively affluent countries do not have high infant mortality, nor do its citizens need children to supplement the family income or to care for them in old age. Such countries also have high educational attainment. Although education may enlighten students about the scope of the population problem, its most powerful influences on population growth are indirect. First, post secondary education delays marriage and consequently decreases the number of children any woman can bear. Second, it opens new vocational opportunities for women of childbearing age. Third, people with higher educations tend to have higher incomes, and are thus less likely to need children to provide old-age security. Fourth, in states with compulsory education, the child cannot substantially contribute to the family finances; instead, they drain economic resources. Fifth, states with compulsory education are more likely to have social security for the elderly. All these factors are even more important in tightly knit traditional

societies in which individuals are sustained not primarily by the nuclear family, but without extended family and social groups (Caldwell 1976: 339-44).

These factors collectively explain population growth rates. They predict that as long as people remain uneducated, lack economic security, and live in a country with high infant mortality and no social security, then they will have large families. Conversely, as health care increases, infant mortality decreases, and governments fund social security programs and establish compulsory education, then birth rates will decline even as death rates decline. These theoretical predictions have been borne out time and again by epidemiological facts (World Health Organization 1999: 3-23). The difference in population growth rates between countries is dramatic. In 1998 rates in the lowest developed countries averaged 1.9%; in medium developed countries, 1.6%; and in the highest developed countries, .6% (United Nations Development Program 2000: 226). Finally, the Human Development Index (a compilation of factors reflecting health and economic well-being) has increased worldwide over the last quarter century (United Nations Development Program 2000: 178-185). This trend almost perfectly parallels the decline in the number of people starving (Bread for the World 2000: 4). The DTT is a theory well established in fact.

Hence, we have compelling theoretical and empirical evidence that Hardin's proposal would likely have a result opposite of that predicted. That's not quite right. Aid that simply kept the starving alive and did nothing to change their overall well-being, might well have his predicted result. It would arguably prolong the second stage of transition, and increase suffering. However, immediate food aid and medical assistance, coupled with developmental assistance to enhance economic security, lower Infant Mortality Rates, and improve the educational attainment of its citizens would remove incentives for large families and replace them with incentives for smaller ones.

Since Hardin's position is both theoretically and empirically flawed, we are left with two basic options. As I stated at the beginning, however, I take the charity position to be the default. That is, if the claim that we have a strong obligation to assist cannot be defended, then we should conclude that assisting is morally permissible but not morally obligatory. Whether that strong obligation can be defended is what we will now determine.

## Strong Obligation to assist

### *A Responsibility to Help the Vulnerable*

The most familiar ground for claiming that we have a strong duty to assist is simply that, if we can alleviate people's suffering or prevent their dying at little personal cost, then we morally ought to do it (Singer 1996/1972: 28). This seems especially plausible when those in need are in no way responsible for their own plight. Since the overwhelming majority of those who are seriously undernourished are children

who are paradigmatically innocent and vulnerable (Bread for the World 2000: 100-2), then their need would arguably demand our assistance (LaFollette and May 1995). In this world we are mutually dependent. We live in the conditions which constitute the “circumstances of justice” (Hume 1978/1740).

#### OUR DEPENDENCE ON OTHERS

Although some people, and especially children, are more vulnerable than others, all of us were and are dependent on others. None of us is—or could be—wholly self-sufficient. Most of us recognize that our parents had to care for us lest we die. But that is only the beginning of the debt to our predecessors. Our abilities to speak a language, to read literature, to appreciate art, to live in cities, to travel the world, and to purchase the goods we want and need arose only because of the efforts of those who came before. “It is of grace and not of ourselves that we live civilized lives” (Dewey 1988/1922: 19). We are likewise dependent on our contemporaries, both near and far.

Of course someone influenced by Adam Smith might think that people’s behavior benefitting others is really just disguised or redirected self-interest. I am sure that explains some such behavior; I see no reason to think it explains it all. The best evidence suggests a biological basis for altruistic tendencies (Ridley 1996; Sober and Wilson 1998). Had others acted solely out of their own interest, wholly indifferent to us and our vulnerabilities, most of us would not be alive. Had they largely ignored our vulnerabilities, we might be alive, but in a substantially diminished condition.

Nations, like individuals, are also vulnerable. In the distant past, countries may have been relatively self-sufficient. No longer. Now every country is vulnerable to others’ actions. As the earlier data on global imports indicated, we heavily depend on other countries’s trading with us. Indeed, the more developed a country’s economy, the more dependent she is on others, although in many respects she may have immense power that masks that vulnerability. For example, the powerful economies of the United States, Japan, and Western European cannot survive without imported oil and raw minerals that drive their respective industries (Brown 1974). Our global economy makes our mutual dependence clear. In such a system, responding to the pressing needs of distant others is morality’s way of acknowledging our reciprocal vulnerability, our common humanity. It reflects the fact that we now globally live in the circumstances of justice (Hume 1978/1740: Book III, Section II, Part II). Or, to use a different model, reciprocal caring is a form of moral insurance (Shue 1996: 119-22).

#### PROTECTING THE VULNERABLE

Robert Goodin offers an intriguing and powerful variant of this argument. He argues that our obligation to assist the vulnerable is not a unique positive responsibility, but is rather a general moral duty that ungirds all special role responsibilities (1985). On the common view of morality, special obligations are especially potent and arise entirely from our voluntarily assumed obligations (Hart 1955: 183-4). However, Goodin argues, this voluntarist model cannot explain the presence, content, context,

form, or strength of our obligations to family and friends, duties of gratitude, or even our obligations arising from promises, contracts, and role or professional duties. The entire panoply of special rights is far better explained as arising from others' vulnerability in relation to us. "It is vulnerability, however engendered, that plays the crucial role in generating special responsibilities" (Goodin 1985: 107).

The voluntarist model cannot even adequately explain the presence—let alone strength—of our duties to keep promises. For promises where nothing is at stake are only minimally binding—and then only for purely consequentialist reasons. At other times, we are obligated to fulfill other's expectations when they are especially vulnerable to us, even without an explicit promise to help them. This obligation is even codified in the legal doctrine of estoppel (Goodin 1985: 42-8). If Goodin is that right that we have this general duty, then we should help those who are especially vulnerable to us, particularly when we can assist them at relatively little cost to ourselves. When others are especially vulnerable to the actions of entire groups, then those groups—and derivatively their members—bear a special responsibility to help (Goodin 1985: 135-41).

This account, if plausible, would bolster the common view that we have an obligation to save the vulnerable, especially since we can collectively and individually assist them at relatively little cost to ourselves. And the fact is, we can save the lives of many. According to Bread for the World, the United States could halve the number of its own and the world's hungry with an investment of \$6 billion a year, just slightly more than \$20 a person (Bread for the World 2000: 3). Even if this estimate were inflated by a factor of two, we can, through concerted action, largely end world hunger by investing \$100 per US citizen, per year, with the amounts diminishing over time. And with the cooperation of the rest of the developed world, we could, with the same contribution, likely end hunger and go some distance toward generally improving the lot for the more than billion people who are currently living in poverty—on less than \$1 per day (World Bank 2000: 46). It is difficult to imagine what argument could be mustered to suggest that (a) this investment is not worth that cost or that (b) any tolerably decent human being would not be willing to pay that cost. It would be, in Goodin's words, just the fulfillment of our collective and individual responsibilities.

However, the argument need not stop here—although often it does. Our mutual interdependence and the extreme vulnerability of the poor paves the way for a second, potentially more potent, argument—an argument that, if sound, shows why even a libertarian would claim that we have an obligation to assist the starving.

### *A Duty to Rectify Injustice*

Most discussions of world hunger ask simply whether the relatively affluent should aid the starving (Cullity 1996, for example, makes this explicit). They imply or assume that the starving are relatively distant, and, in some important sense, wholly independent of us. Even Drèze and Sen often speak this way: they speak of the "problems" of famines and chronic hunger and the "need" (not requirement) for "public action" (Drèze and Sen 1989: 17). However, this understates our relation to the malnourished, not only within our country, but throughout the

world. It assumes that we are in no way responsible for their plight. Yet if these assumptions are false, then we arguably have a potent “negative” obligation to assist them—to rectify the wrongs we helped create, the suffering we sustain, and the inequalities from which we benefit.

Here’s why. According to most moral theories we have especially strong negative obligations not to cause harm. If we subsequently harm someone, then we have a potent obligation to undo that harm, and, in some cases, even to make recompense for our misdeeds. We have reason to think that those of us in affluent nations are partly caused the plight of the undernourished, that we actively sustain their impoverishment, and that we benefit from their diminished condition. If *any* of these claims are true, then we have not only the “ordinary” positive obligation to assist the vulnerable, but also a negative obligation, arising from the harm that we caused and/or sustain. If all are true, then the negative obligation would be very strong. Let us look at each in turn.

#### WE CAUSED THEIR PLIGHT

The same economic, social, and political interdependencies that explain our mutual vulnerabilities suggest that we likely partially caused the starving people’s plight. Decisions in one part of the world have economic ripples elsewhere. Some ripples become tidal waves. We have no doubt about this when those waves crash onto our own economic shores. When OPEC hikes gasoline prices, it increases our costs of living and we are infuriated. When Japan boosts tariffs, it hits our wallets. When we are on the short end of the economic stick, we quickly recognize that others’ decisions to sell or withhold goods or to increase tariffs negatively impacts our economies. Yet we conveniently forget the impact of our economies on others. That is a factual and moral mistake. For as potent as the actions of others are on us, our actions are even more significant for them. The West is economically so powerful that even seemingly insignificant actions can have dramatic effects, especially on Third World countries.

These effects reveal two different ways we arguably cause the suffering of the world’s impoverished peoples. Consider two variations on a single analogy: In the first, place unwilling gladiators into an arena with lions. When some are killed, I cannot wash my hands of their deaths. Although the lions—and not I—were the immediate cause of their deaths, I am responsible since I placed them in this vulnerable position. Two, I do not place gladiators into this arena. Rather, I “offer” men in the region the “option” of becoming gladiators. I do so knowing full well that my arena is the only source of income in the area. I assuage my guilt by claiming that since these men have volunteered to fight the lions, then I am not responsible for their deaths. Nonetheless, by using their extreme vulnerability to get them to do what no sane person would do if they had an option, then I am still responsible for any harm that results. Again, we have no problem acknowledging this if we are the vulnerable parties; why should we deny it when we are the exploiters?

Arguably we (partially) caused the plight of the starving in one of these senses. We are highly advantaged people whose economic, social, and political institutions are “causally deeply entangled in the misery of the poor” (Pogge 1997: 505

2000). Moreover, our relative social starting positions “have emerged from a single historical process that was pervaded by grievous wrongs” (509). That is why: “We should not tolerate such radical inequalities in social starting positions if the allocation of those positions depends upon historical processes in which all important moral (and legal) rules and principles were massively violated” (Ibid.).

Admittedly, the causal networks of which Pogge speaks are astoundingly complex. That is why my gladiator example is somewhat disanalogous. In that case, I placed (or enticed) them into the arena with the lions. However, no one person or country single-handedly created the conditions which led to starvation. That is why no one is wholly responsible for the plight of the impoverished and starving. Our world and our global economy result from a confluence of factors, including the choices of billions of people over an extended time. Certainly some much smaller number of players, actors, and events, are especially significant in this causal chain. However, we rarely know precisely who caused what. Many of us assume this ignorance lets us off the moral hook.

I do not see why. We need not be the sole cause of an event to be (partially) responsible for it. After all, we are never strictly the sole cause of any event: actions have consequences only within certain contexts and background conditions (Hart and Honoré 1973) [which is why the OPEC nations are not solely responsible for skyrocketing oil prices either!]. If we were morally responsible only for those things for which we were the sole cause, then arguably we would not be responsible for anything. And, if we were morally responsible only for those things for which we were the predominant cause, we would be responsible for very little. No doubt in select cases, where background conditions are predictably stable, we might feel justified in ascribing sole responsibility for some actions. But that is rare. For most of what is important in our lives, the question is not am I *solely* or even *predominantly* responsible for harm, but whether am I *responsible enough*? We must ask: did I play a *sufficiently important* role that it is proper to attribute responsibility to me—to blame me for mistakes (and to expect me to atone for them) or to praise me for my successes?

Let me give two examples. My parents were surely pivotal forces making me who I am. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to think they are wholly responsible. There are myriad other factors, some of which I know, others of which I am ignorant. Despite the presence of these other factors, we would be foolish to deny my parents’ causal role in making me who I am.

Two, professors are not wholly responsible for the successes and failures of their students. To think they are assumes professors have far more power than they do. This is a mistake that both administrators and students often make. Yet we should not err on the other extreme by inferring that professors are not responsible at all for student learning. The fact is: student learning is a function of a variety of factors, one of which is surely the professor.

There is a childlike part of us that wants to place all the moral responsibility (and especially the moral blame) on a few shoulders; we like neatly dividing the world into the good guys and the bad guys. But that does not reflect the way the world works. As the previous examples indicate, the forces that make us who

we are, and the forces that create significant political, social, and economic changes, are not singular, but arise from a convergence of factors. That is true not only of work habits or student learning, but also—of special relevance to the current issue—of endemic and episodic hunger.

In short, we need not precisely determine everyone's contributory role before accepting or assigning responsibility. Once we know that we played a contributory role in creating the harm, then we should acknowledge partial responsibility and a heightened obligation to assist—to help undo the effects of what we have done. Since the economies of the Western world substantially influence people in the third world—that our well-being has come, to some degree, at their expense—then we should accept some responsibility for their plight.

#### WE ACTIVELY SUSTAIN THEIR IMPOVERISHMENT

Some might think it is too strong to say that we caused the conditions that make widespread hunger likely. Even if that were true, we often act in ways that sustain the malnourished's condition. To use the earlier analogy, if I had nothing to do with placing people in the arena with the lions, but subsequently opened a chain of hotels catering to fans who come to watch, then my actions actively support the exploitative practice. I am partly responsible for the death of the gladiators.

The relevance to world hunger is clear. We are voracious consumers. Because we want fresh fruits, coffee, and spices—and we want them at a minimal cost—we bring it about (cause) or support (sustain) efforts to convert an area's most arable land's from growing staples for the locals to growing niceties for us. Sometimes this is devastating to the local poor (even if desired by the local rich), especially if the demand for these luxuries abates, as it often does. Further, in our quest for cheap goods, we financially reward those businesses engaging in exploitative hiring practices in the Third World, thereby partially causing the suffering of the vulnerable (Wolff 2002). We also politically support the international borrowing and resource privileges that burden democratic regimes with debts generated by former dictators, and that allow those dictators to legally abscond with the country's natural resources (Pogge 2001b, pp. 20-1). Although we may occasionally complain about these (and other related) practices, the fact that we support them through our consumption and political decisions shows that we sustain the impoverishment of the worst off, and are thereby partial causes in their continuation.

#### WE BENEFIT FROM THEIR SUFFERING

Even if we do not actively support the systems that harm the impoverished, most people in the Western world benefit from the poor's predicament and do nothing to stop it. In that way we are causal contributors to their deprivation. Some might claim that our causal role—and our moral responsibility—are diminished since we simply failed to stop the harm. In other contexts, however, we recognize that inaction can causal harm. If a state fails to properly educate or provide affordable health care to its children, then the government has caused their illiteracy or ill-health; if a government fails to have an emergency system for coping with natural disasters, then it is responsible for deaths they could have prevented. And

if I fail to stop an assault on a third party, especially if the cost or risk of intervening is minimal, then most of us will say that my inaction contributes to any harm befalling the victim. This is especially true if I benefit from that harm (the victim has me in her will). For then my refusal signals that my action is, in some sense, intentional.

### *Responsibility in the Real World*

These three arguments give us reason to think that we have a negative responsibility to ensure that the poor of the world are fed. However, these arguments, though powerful, are not certain. Does this give us a reason to do nothing? Of course not. We should act on the best evidence we have. The degree of epistemological certainty we require before acting depends on the relative costs of action versus inaction. Before assessing criminal penalties—where the costs to accused criminals are enormous—we reasonably demand very strong evidence of their guilt. However, under most circumstances, we do not use nor would we countenance such an exacting standard.

We should employ the same standards of evidence when (a) accepting praise, (b) holding others responsible for harms they partially cause, sustain, or could remedy, and (c) accepting responsibility for similar harms we partially cause, sustain, or could remedy. We use a more relaxed standard of evidence when accepting (and expecting) praise for our successes and when attributing blame to those who harm us. We should use the same standard when determining responsibility for our actions or inactions. If we do, then we will recognize some causal responsibility for the plight of the impoverished in our world. And, if Goodin is correct—that we needn't be causally responsible for harm to have a task responsibility for reduce harm (Goodin 1985: 126-7)—then we should help, especially since we can remedy their condition at relatively little cost to ourselves.

### Conclusion

We have a multilayered argument that suggests we have a strong obligation to bolster the well-being of the seriously impoverished. First, we have a positive obligation to assist those who are vulnerable to our actions. Second, we also have reason to think we are partially responsible for the suffering of the world's poor, and hence, have a strong negative obligation to stop further harm. Third, we could feed them and ease their suffering pain with relatively little effort. If we do nothing in the face of these arguments, we have reason to think that we are complicitous in the deaths of many people. We might be wrong, but when, with only a relatively small sacrifice, we can avoid the decided possibility that we are accomplices in many people's deaths, then morally we ought to act.

Knowing precisely how to act is more unclear. Doubtless isolated individuals have limited power to remedy these problems. To empower and feed the impoverished we need collective action and a change in global institutions (Shue 1996: 128-9). Specifically, if the arguments in the last section are correct, then our first

efforts should be to cease acting in ways that cause or sustain others' impoverishment. Then we should (a) work to bring international efforts to bear on especially corrupt governments, (b) use global resources (Pogge 1997) to promote broad development that will make endemic hunger a painful note from our collective past, and (c) establish systems which effectively respond to episodic hunger.

Likely, though, bare political efforts will not entirely discharge our duties to the impoverished—since we know that governments are unlikely to soon change their ways or give the support they should. Hence, we should also contribute to non-government organizations with proven track records in eliminating hunger, promoting development, and empowering the poor. These contributions will not only assist the needy, they will show others that we are serious about the need for our governmental and institutional change. The extent to which we should contribute is, of course, controversial—it raises the ever-pressing issue about the degree to which morality can be demanding (Kagan 1989; Scheffler 1992; Williams 1985). However, such issues are beyond the scope of this paper.

#### Acknowledgment

Thanks to Thomas W. Pogge, Ray Frey, and Christopher Wellman for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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