

help me, then you are not committing an injustice. Of course you are certainly permitted to fund my operation. But that would be charity. And charity is not something that we morally can compel.

For Narveson, we are morally permitted to do anything we like, so long as we do not violate the rights of others. While it would be generous and kind and compassionate of us to feed the hungry, doing so is morally optional, rather than required. It is a matter of charity, not justice.

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Throughout history it has been the lot of most people to know of others worse off than they, and often enough of others who face starvation. In the contemporary world, television and other mass media enable all of us in the better-off areas to hear about starvation in even the most remote places. What, if any, are our obligations toward victims of starvation?

This can be a rather complex subject in real-world situations. We must begin by distinguishing importantly different cases. For *starve* functions both as a passive verb, indicating something that happens to one, and as an active verb, designating something inflicted by one person on another. In the latter case, starvation is a form of killing, and of course comes under the same strictures that any other method of killing is liable to. But when the problem is plague, crop-failure due to drought, or sheer lack of know-how, there is no obviously guilty party. Then the question is whether we, the amply fed, are guilty parties if we fail to come to the rescue of those victims.

Starvation and Murder

If I lock you in a room with no food and don't let you out, I have murdered you. If group A burns the crops of group B, it has slaughtered the Bs. There is, surely, no genuine *issue* about such cases. It is wrong to kill innocent people, and one way of killing them is as eligible for condemnation by this principle as any other, so far as killing goes. Such cases are happily unusual, and we need say no more about them.

Our interest, then, is in the cases where this is not so, or at least not obviously so. But some writers, such as James Rachels, hold that letting

someone die is morally equivalent to killing them. Or "basically" equivalent. Is this so? Most people do not think so; it takes a subtle philosophical argument to persuade them of this. The difference between a bad thing which I intentionally or at least foreseeably brought about, and one which just happened, through no fault of my own, matters to most of us in practice. Is our view sustainable in principle, too? Suppose the case is one I could do something about, as when you are starving and my granary is burgeoning. Does that make a difference?

Duties of Justice and Duties of Charity

Another important question, which has cropped up in some of our other cases too but is nowhere more clearly relevant than here, is the distinction between *justice* and *charity*. By justice I here intend those things which we may, if necessary, be *forced* to do—where our actions can be constrained by others in order to ensure our performance. Charity, on the other hand, comes "from the heart": *charity* means, roughly, *caring*, an emotionally-tinged desire to benefit other people just because they need it.

We should note a special point about this. It is often said that charity "cannot be compelled." Is this true? In one clear sense, it is. For in this sense, charity consists *only* of benefits motivated by love or concern. If instead you regard an act as one that we may forcibly compel people to do, then you are taking that act to be a case of *justice*. Can it at the same time be charity? It can if we detach the motive from the act, and define charity simply as doing good for others. The claim that charity in this second sense cannot be compelled is definitely not true by definition, and is in fact false. People are frequently compelled to do good for others, especially by our government, which taxes us in order to benefit the poor, educate the uneducated, and so on. Whether they *should* be thus compelled is a real moral question, however, and must not be evaded by recourse to semantics. (Whether those programs produce benefits that outweigh their costs is a very complex question; but that they do often produce some benefits, at whatever cost, is scarcely deniable.)

When we ask, then, on which side of the moral divide we should put feeding the hungry—unenforceable charity, to be left to individual consciences, or enforceable justice, perhaps to be handled by governments—is a genuine moral issue, and an important one. We are asking whether feeding the hungry is not only something we ought to do but also something

we *must do*, as a matter of justice. It is especially this latter question that concerns us in this chapter.

We should note also the logical possibility that someone might differ so strongly with most of us on this matter as to think it positively *wrong* to feed the hungry. That is a rather extreme view, but it looks rather like the view that some writers, such as Garrett Hardin, defend. However, it is misleading to characterize their view in this way. Hardin thinks that feeding the hungry is an exercise in *misguided* charity, not real charity. In feeding the hungry today, he argues, we merely create a much greater problem tomorrow, for feeding the relatively few now will create an unmanageably large number next time their crops fail, a number we won't be able to feed and who will consequently starve. Thus we actually cause more starvation by feeding people now than we do by not feeding them, hard though that may sound. Hardin, then, is not favouring cruelty toward the weak. The truly charitable, he believes, should be *against* feeding the hungry, at least in some types of cases.

Hardin's argument brings up the need for another distinction, of urgent importance: between *principles* and *policies*. Being in favour of feeding the hungry *in principle* may or may not imply that we should feed the particular persons involved in any specific case. For that may depend on further facts about those cases. For example, perhaps trying to feed *these* hungry people runs into the problem that the government of those hungry people doesn't want you feeding them. If the price of feeding them is that you must go to war, then it may not be the best thing to do. If enormous starvation faces a group in the farther future if the starving among them now are fed now, then a policy of feeding them now may not be recommended by a principle of humanity. And so on. Principles are relatively abstract and may be considered just by considering possibilities; but when it comes to policy pursued in the real world, facts cannot be ignored.

The Basic Issues

Our general question is what sort of moral concerns we have with the starving. The basic question then breaks down into these two: first, is there a *basic duty of justice* to feed the starving? And second, if there isn't, then is there a *basic requirement of charity* that we be disposed to do so, and if so, how strong is that requirement?

Justice and Starvation

Let's begin with the first. Is it *unjust* to let others starve to death? We must distinguish two very different ways in which someone might try to argue for this.

First, there are those who, like Rachels, argue that there is no fundamental distinction between killing and letting die. If that is right, then the duty not to kill is all we need to support the conclusion that there is a duty of justice not to let people starve, and the duty not to kill (innocent) people is uncontroversial. Second, however, some insist that feeding the hungry is a duty of justice even if we don't accept the equivalence of killing and letting-die. They therefore need a different argument, in support of a positive right to be fed. The two different views call for very different discussions.

Starving and Allowing to Starve

Starving and allowing-to-starve are special cases of killing and letting-die. Are they the same, as some *insist*? In *our* discussion of euthanasia, we saw the need for a crucial distinction here: between the view that they are literally indistinguishable, and the view that even though they are logically distinguishable, they are nevertheless morally equivalent. As to the first, the argument for nonidentity of the two is straightforward. When you kill someone, you do an act, *x*, which brings it about that the person is dead *when he would otherwise still be alive*. You induce a *change* (for the worse) in his condition. But when you let someone die, this is not so, for she would have died even if you had, say, been in Australia at the time. How can you be said to be the "cause" of something which would have happened if you didn't exist?

To be sure, we do often attribute causality to human inaction. But the clear cases of such attribution are those where the agent in question had an antecedent *responsibility* to do the thing in question. The geraniums may die because you fail to water them, but to say that you thus *caused* them to die is to imply that you were *supposed* to do so. And of course we may agree that *if we have* a duty to feed the poor and we don't feed them, then we are at fault. But the question before us is *whether* we have this duty, and the argument we are examining purports to prove this by showing that even when we do nothing, we still "cause" their deaths. If the argument

presupposes that very responsibility, it plainly begs the question rather than giving us a good answer to it. What about the claim that killing and letting die are "morally equivalent"? Here again, there is a danger of begging the question. If we have a duty to feed the hungry and we don't, then not doing so might be morally equivalent to killing them, perhaps—though I doubt that any proponent would seriously propose life imprisonment for failing to contribute to the cause of feeding the hungry! But again, the consequence clearly doesn't follow if we don't have that duty, which is in question. Those who think we do not have fundamental duties to take care of each other, but only duties to refrain from killing and the like will deny that they are morally equivalent.

The liberty proponent will thus insist that when Beethoven wrote symphonies instead of using his talents to grow food for the starving, like the peasants he depicted in his Pastoral symphony, he was doing what he had a perfect right to do. A connoisseur of music might go further and hold that he was also *doing the right thing*: that someone with the talents of a Beethoven does more for people by composing great music than by trying to save lives—even if he would have been *successful* in saving those lives, which is not terribly likely anyway!

How do we settle this issue? If we were all connoisseurs, it would be easy: if you know and love great music, you will find it easy to believe that a symphony by Beethoven or Mahler is worth more than prolonging the lives of a few hundred starvelings for another few miserable years. If you are one of those starving persons, your view might be different. (But it might not. Consider the starving artist in his garret, famed in Romantic novels and operas: they lived *voluntarily* in squalor, believing that what they were doing was worth the sacrifice.)

We are not all connoisseurs, nor are most of us starving. Advocates of welfare duties talk glibly as though there were a single point of view ("welfare") that dominates everything else. But it's not true. There are all kinds of points of view, diverse, and to a large extent incommensurable. Uniting them is not as simple as the welfarist or utilitarian may think. It is *not* certain, not obvious, that we "add more to the sum of human happiness" by supporting Oxfam than by supporting the opera. How are we to unite diverse people on these evaluative matters? The most plausible answer, I think, is the point of view that allows different people to live their various lives, by forbidding interference with them. Rather than insisting

pursuits. We'll agree to let each person live as that person sees fit, with only our bumpings into each other being subject to public control. To do this, we need to draw a sort of line around each person, and insist that others not cross that line without the permission of the occupant. The rule will be not to forcibly intervene in the lives of others, thus requiring that our relations be mutually agreeable. Enforced feeding of the starving, however, does cross the line, invading the farmer or the merchant, forcing him to part with some of his hard-earned produce and give it without compensation to others. That, says the advocate of liberty, is theft, not charity.

So if someone is starving, we may pity him or we may be indifferent, but the question so far as our *obligations* are concerned is only this: how did he *get* that way? If it was not the result of my previous activities, then I have no obligation to him, and may help him out or not, as I choose. If it was such a result, then of course I must do something. If you live and have long lived downstream from me, and I decide to dam up the river and divert the water elsewhere, then I have deprived you of your water and must compensate you, by supplying you with the equivalent, or else desist. But if you live in the middle of a parched desert and it does not rain, so that you are faced with death from thirst, that is not my doing and I have no compensating to do.

This liberty-respecting idea avoids, by and large, the need to make the sort of utility comparisons essential to the utility or welfare view. If we have no general obligation to manufacture as much utility for others as possible, then we don't have to concern ourselves about measuring that utility. Being free to pursue our own projects, we will evaluate our results as best we may, each in our own way. There is no need to keep a constant check on others to see whether we ought to be doing more for them and less for ourselves.

The Ethics of the Hair Shirt

In stark contrast to the liberty-respecting view stands the idea that we are to count the satisfactions of others as equal in value to our own. If I can create a little more pleasure for some stranger by spending my dollar on him than I would create for myself by spending it on an ice cream cone, I then have a putative *obligation* to spend it on him. Thus I am to continually defer to others in the organization of my activities, and shall be assailed by guilt whenever I am not bending my energies to the relief of those allegedly less fortunate than I. Benefit others, at the expense of