Rationalized Selfishness or Reasonable Skepticism?
Objections to Singer and Unger on the Obligations of the Affluent

by

Al-Noor Nenshi Nathoo

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

CALGARY, ALBERTA
AUGUST, 2001

© Al-Noor Nenshi Nathoo 2001
The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Rationalized Selfishness or Reasonable Skepticism? Objections to Singer and Unger on the Obligations of the Affluent" submitted by Al-Noor Nenshi Nathoo in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Supervisor, Dr. Robert Xavier Ware, Department of Philosophy

Dr. John Arthur Baker, Department of Philosophy

Dr. Mathew Zachariah, Faculty of Education

Date
Peter Singer and Peter Unger suggest that the majority of the world’s affluent act immorally in failing to contribute substantial portions of their earnings to the lessening of poverty-related suffering and premature death in distant nations. In this paper, I attempt to shed doubt on the plausibility of using, as defenses against such a claim, the assertions that: 1) development aid is ineffective or self-defeating; 2) morality does not require us to weigh the needs of all equally from an impartial standpoint; and 3) the affluent have limited obligations to assist those physically and socially distant. I provide an argument for shifting the focus of such inquiries from providing aid to addressing injustice, and outline several additional areas of analysis that will be crucial in properly assessing the nature and magnitude of the obligations of the world’s materially wealthy to its poor.
Dedication

To Shaheen, for her love
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Approval Page</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epigraph</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations &amp; Assumptions</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singer: From Drowning to Starving Child</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unger: The Envelope and The Vintage Sedan</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance and Experience</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multitudes and Numbers</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time and Sorts of Situation</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morally Relevant Distinctions</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter I: Promising Objections</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Lifeboat</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrying Capacity and the Lifeboat Analogy</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Malthusian Paradigm</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Problem with Food Aid</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Food to Development Aid</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impartial Morality</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Subjective to Objective</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impartiality in Principle</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context-sensitive Subjectivity</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obligations to the Distant</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocity</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliation</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincialism as Anachronism</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter II: From Symptoms to Causes</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty in Context: Global Structures</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Financial Institutions</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whatever Happened to Keynes?</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital without Borders</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When Elephants Stomp the Ground</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Implications of Systemic Failures</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Defense of Justice</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter III: The Cost of Living Morally</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking Back</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sketching the Landscape Ahead</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics is too Demanding</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Epigraph

Philosophers should not only interpret our beliefs; when they are false, they should change them

Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*
**Introduction**

The cost of dinner for two in a moderately expensive New York restaurant, Thomas Nagel has remarked, is roughly equivalent to the per capita annual income of Bangladesh. Information from reputed international aid sources indicate that three dollars is likely a reasonable estimate of the average cost of purchasing, transporting and administering several packets of oral rehydration therapy, designed to stem dehydration caused by diarrhea, to a child in the developing world who, were it not for her appropriately consuming them, would otherwise likely become one of the approximately 30,000 children on the planet who die each day from easily preventable causes\(^1\).

These statistics evidence a set of circumstances which raises a compelling moral question for the world's materially fortunate: what obligations does such a state of affairs impose, if any, on those who have access to the means by which to mitigate the suffering thereby caused - a category into which most peoples of the developed world fall?

Two important works in the philosophical literature appear to have become benchmarks against which philosophical attempts at engaging the issue are often juxtaposed. Peter Singer left little scope for the leisure pursuits of the wealthy in the famed and controversial *Famine, Affluence and Morality*\(^2\). Peter Unger's more comprehensive treatment of the question in *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence*, more than two decades later, is dedicated in part to providing, via dissimilar means, argument for an identical conclusion. The central claim of both authors, and one which this work will take as its starting point, is that the citizens of the industrialized world have a moral obligation to contribute substantial portions of their earnings to lessening suffering and premature death from poverty-related causes\(^3\).

---


\(^3\) Unger takes this conclusion one step further in positing a duty to resort, in defined circumstances, to acts of fraud, embezzlement and intentionally inflicted harm in the name of relief of greater suffering.
That such a claim would meet with considerable and strenuous objection in the academic philosophy community, let alone the wider populace, is hardly surprising. Yet the sheer import of that conclusion, if it is indeed defensible, on our generally accepted understanding of what it means to lead a moral life in affluent societies, suggests that it is insufficient to dismiss such claims as tenuous or counterintuitive without more careful scrutiny.

The following is an attempt to take up that challenge, albeit in modest proportion. My aim will be to selectively focus on several potentially powerful objections that have been leveled at Singer and Unger’s central claim in an effort to determine whether these constitute reasonable responses or rationalizations of wrongful selfishness. As a portion of Singer's work implicitly, and Unger's work explicitly, is premised on the fallibility of these objections, an attempt to deconstruct them will assist in the partial evaluation of these authors' works, though this shall not by any means be the object of this enterprise. Nor will this project aim to provide, owing to limitations of space, any sort of overarching account of, or firm conclusion regarding, the obligations of the world’s affluent to its poorest. It is nevertheless my hope that the exploration will shed more light of reason on the grave and daunting question of what it means for the materially well-endowed to live morally.

I begin the investigation by issuing below important caveats to which to attend in a work of this nature and regarding a subject matter of such striking depth and complexity. A subsequent descriptive account of the arguments forwarded by Singer in his seminal paper and several later works on the topic, as well as those of Unger in the pivotal first and second chapters of his relevant opus, lay the groundwork for the central normative analysis to follow. Chapter I provides a critical examination of three promising objections made at a general and theoretical level against such stringent accounts of our obligations as has been proposed by Singer and Unger. In particular, I examine: the common claim that famine relief and development aid are self-defeating; the metaethical concern that morality conceived as strict impartiality is untenable; and the intuitively appealing belief that our duties to people socially and physically distant from us are severely limited or

Though I shall briefly revisit this further (counterintuitive) claim in Chapter III, the important issues to which it gives rise are unfortunately beyond the scope of this work.
non-existent. Chapter II examines an objection to the central claim of Singer and Unger that I suggest has unjustifiably received scant attention in the philosophical literature but which, if defensible, would have us shift the focus of our obligations from humanitarian aid to concerns of justice. In Chapter III, I offer some concluding remarks and attempt to situate this work within a larger context by pointing ahead to suggest areas of additional analysis that need undertaking or consideration if the affluent are to have an adequate account of the true cost of living morally.

My analysis will attempt to shed doubt on the plausibility of several of the most common objections directed against the central claim of Unger and Singer. I shall go on to suggest that Unger and Singer’s accounts of the obligations of the affluent to the poor are nevertheless seriously deficient in at least one respect: both authors, in their zeal to defend compelling reasons for the rich to contribute massive sums to development aid, fail to adequately address considerations of justice arising from the inequalities and power imbalances of our global economic and social institutions and practices.

Limitations & Assumptions

Having indicated what this project will attempt to be, I offer a few words about what it is not.

A suitably comprehensive argument regarding the moral obligations of the affluent towards the less fortunate, it seems to me, requires and must rest upon the outcome of explorations into several crucial questions - of which I isolate several below - which are not the focus of this inquiry but which would surely deserve monographs of their own had we but world enough and time.

The first is an adequate conception of justice, applied internationally. Whether one begins with a Rawlsian difference-principle or accounts based on any number of other approaches - rights, deontology, relativism, communitarianism or Marxism among them - the issue of what justice might look like globally will be for many an important determiner

---

4 I flesh these out briefly in Chapter III in the process of pointing ahead to important additional considerations beyond the scope of this work.
of what the obligations, if any, of those in the industrialized world might look like towards the planet’s other occupants. While I will visit the issue of justice as it relates to the prevailing global economic and social order as well as to Singer and Unger’s assertions, I do not here make any concerted attempt to redress the fate of undeserved relative obscurity to which this issue has arguably been assigned in the philosophical literature.

The second crucial matter involves the nature of the limits of morality and obligation, and the relative place of morality amongst the various motivations there are for doing anything. I shall not be interested, in what follows, in what the dictates of prudence or self-interest (whether conceived from within or outside the boundaries of morality) may prescribe in regards to our action or inaction towards the world’s poorest. For now, the following work will assume a framework within morality without assuming the Herculean and perhaps Sisyphean task of defining the scope and boundary of that enterprise.

I set aside these central issues for the moment - in order to provide greater opportunity to carefully explore objections to Unger and Singer’s common conclusion - without dismissing their significance or import to the ultimate project of thoroughly assessing the extent of our obligations towards the poor and powerless of the world.

The following more focused project of attempting to examine several objections to Singer and Unger’s central claim has, I wish to declare, an additional built-in limitation. I do not suggest that analysis of the following sort can provide the type of requisite justification and reason-giving force, for all to whom it could potentially apply, to alter behaviour in prescribed ways. I begin this undertaking with the assumption that rational discourse, even when resulting in a coherent and sound argument, does not always provide sufficient reason for all to change moral outlook. If people have moral motivation, rational argument has its place in helping to determine what the requirements of morality are. But, as with many others, I do not assume that people can be argued into having moral motivation if they lack it. “Psychopaths are not necessarily lacking in ratiocinative

---

5 The sort of detailed examination of the limits of morality to which I allude can be found in Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), especially Chapters 7, 8 & 9. Kagan considers whether, once one has accepted a reason to be moral or promote the good, there are defensible grounds for limiting the requirement to always promote the best outcome.

6 Amongst such reasons for action which fall outside the scope of moral reasons is the pursuit of the ‘good life’, as paradigmatically defined and defended by Susan Wolf in “Moral Saints”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume LXXIX, No. 8, August 1982.
capacity." Thus the assumption that given an agreement on some fundamental and widely accepted moral premises, rational discussion of the sort engaged in here may be one factor leading us to eventually either change some of our moral convictions, or prod us, by weeding out inconsistencies, to come to a different conclusion about what our extant moral convictions require us to do.

However, whilst making that claim, I do take exception to what seems to me a kind of unjustifiable skepticism:

(A) different kind of absurdity attaches to the production of philosophical criticism of public policy. Moral judgment and moral theory certainly apply to public questions, but they are notably ineffective. When powerful interests are involved it is very difficult to change anything by arguments, however cogent, which appeal to decency, humanity, compassion, or fairness. These considerations also have to compete with the more primitive moral sentiments of honor and retribution and respect for strength. The importance of these in our time makes it unwise in a political argument to condemn aggression and urge altruism of humanity, since the preservation of honor usually demands a capacity for aggression and resistance of humanity... I do not know whether it is more important to change the world or to understand it, but philosophy is best judged by its contribution to the understanding, not to the course of events.

While such caution about the potential impact of philosophy on pressing questions of policy and individual behaviour likely arises from a pragmatic concern about the way the world operates, its relegation of philosophy to a such a restricted role seems to me unwarranted, or at least unjustifiably pessimistic. The resulting bifurcation, whether based on realism or not, of understanding from action may render an attempt such as the following doomed from the very beginning, and this is not how I would wish to start. Rather, it is my hope that reflection and analysis of the sort engaged in here, writ large numbers that detail the potential impact of philosophy on pressing questions of policy and individual behaviour.

---


8 The arguments in this paper, therefore, will make no attempt to be relevant to or carry any moral force for the knave - if any argument can or need be: “...It is a mistake ... to think that there is some objective presumption in favour of the nonethical life, that ethical skepticism is the natural state... The moral philosopher in search of justifications sometimes pretends this is so, overestimating in this respect the need for a justification just as he had overestimated its effect - its effect, at least, on the practicing skeptic.” (from Bernard Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 26). For a discussion of the problem inherent in suggesting that we must be moral if we are rational, see Kai Nielsen, “Must the Immoralist Act Contrary to Reason?” in David Copp and David Zimmerman, Morality, Reason and Truth, (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1986), pp. 212-227.

and consistently pursued, can be a positive influence in the course of history, and, failing those lofty ideals, may at least provide its readers and authors with insights into constructing a framework for evaluating those personal decisions with potential impact on the world's economically less fortunate.

Finally, two preliminary caveats in regards to the general form that most philosophical arguments around this issue seem to take - ones that portend closely related concerns addressed in Chapter II. Almost all accounts of our obligations to the world's poor\footnote{Three notes about terminology: (a) While I shall often use terms such as 'materially fortunate' 'affluent' or 'rich' and 'indigent' or 'poor' to refer to the populations of the developed and developing world respectively, I shall assume but not argue that the latter terms do not exclude, unless explicitly stated otherwise, those in the developed world who experience similar chronic poverty, whether on native reservations, in inner city districts or elsewhere. I shall also assume, though I do not make that case here either, that investigations directed at ascertaining the obligations of the relatively affluent of the North to provide aid to the poor of the South could be similarly applied to the affluent of the South in regards to obligations towards the poor of the South. Finally, I assume it understood that terms such as 'rich' are necessarily relative ones, and that when the population under consideration is the world community, most of those living in its industrialized parts patently fall under such a general heading, even if they are not affluent by local standards. (b) References to poverty in this work should be taken to imply poverty of the economic sort. One could well use the term to refer to other forms of poverty - of spirit or of community cohesion, for instance – though this would of course result in a work of an entirely different nature. (c) Whilst I will not here defend the claim that the terms 'third world' and 'underdeveloped nations' are sufficiently value-laden in a way that may make their use inappropriate, I shall avoid them on the assumption that this is indeed the case. Thus my proclivity in this work to opt for the arguably less pejorative terms 'developing/non-industrialized world' or 'South'.}, in the prevailing literature, focus on the question of what aid or development assistance we, the affluent, should provide to them, the poor. It seems to me that at least two relevant assumptions underlie that question: (1) that, ceteris paribus, most of the abject poor would prefer not to be abjectly poor, and (2) that meeting the basic human needs of most of these individuals is of greater value or import, to them, than any other goals of their choosing because the absence of basic human necessities imposes serious impediments to the pursuit of other life goals. The first of these I shall assume can be accepted with little elaboration. The second requires some clarification. In the work that follows, unless indicated or defined otherwise, I shall presume that the meaningful participation of its intended beneficiaries is a sine qua non of any international development effort, whether couched in terms of development aid, development assistance, or otherwise. This, I think, avoids most of the concerns that might arise from the possibility that the second assumption is questionable.
The second related and perhaps more salient concern I wish to underscore is that of the
great danger, while engaging in this type of inquiry, of assuming a mindset of 'charity', as
that term is used in common parlance, in contrast to something, despite its present vogue
to the point of triteness, akin to 'empowerment'\[11\]. Much of the philosophical literature on
this subject cited in the pages that follow, either implicitly or explicitly, appears to assume
that the pressing question facing the rich involves the extent of their charity towards the
poor. In this work, I am assuming, in some cases contrary to the original intentions of the
authors, that the terms 'charity' or 'development aid' should be taken to mean any form of
action initiated with the purpose of attempting to reduce global poverty or improve access
for the poorest of the poor to the necessities of subsistence. The difference between the
two phrases - 'providing charity' and 'attempting to reduce global poverty' - I take to be
that the former often carries with it connotative baggage of the sort that suggests (and
often is intended to mean) handouts, or direct transfers of monies, goods or services
without accompanying attempts to address the context in which that poverty takes place
and the factors which contribute to it. The latter phrase I hope at least avoids this problem
and importantly does not exclude by definition efforts geared towards assisting people to
help themselves improve their own living conditions, either through various forms of
direct, community-based development assistance, or by aiming to address systemic
issues which perpetuate that poverty\[12\]. In the thirty odd years since Singer first
published his seminal paper, the idea of addressing poverty exclusively through direct
transfers of resources as a means towards the goal of long-term development has been
largely dismissed as potentially destructive, disrespectful of the dignity of poor peoples,
and, ultimately, ineffective\[13\]. That shift in thought in the field of development studies has

\[11\] In making this point, I am not referring to the term 'charity' in its philosophical sense, in the way often
used in lieu of, or in comparison with, words such as 'obligation', 'requirement', 'duty', 'supererogation',
and so on.

\[12\] The general exception to this rule, I assume, is that of situations where emergency relief is obviously
called for, such as during famines and after certain natural disasters. While long-term development
efforts in these instances may have prevented suffering from the emergencies, and, if implemented,
may prevent future such suffering from similar causes, there are clearly instances in which emergency
relief and provision of goods and services is immediately required to sustain human life and mitigate
distress. I take this however, to be the exception, based on the assumption that the vast majority of
human suffering related to poverty is a result of chronic rather than acute deprivation.

\[13\] For a discussion of the criteria for successful human development, see E.F. Schumacher, Small is
Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered, (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), Part III, Chapter 1; Tim
Brodhead, Brent Herbert-Copley and Anne Marie Lambert, Bridges of Hope? Canadian Voluntary
Agencies and the Third World, (Ottawa: The North-South Institute, 1989), Chapter 7; Judith Randel and
Tony German (eds) The Reality of Aid 1997/98: An Independent Review of Development Cooperation,
Knopf Inc, 1999).
been borne out by, if not having partially arisen from, years of evidence of failed development projects in the 1960's and 1970's.14

Unfortunately, much of the recent philosophical literature relating to poverty either fails to take this important shift into account, fails to use terminology that makes it clear that it has done so, or does not take seriously the underlying commitments that have driven these changes in outlook. In doing so, it perpetuates the myth that charity, in this narrow sense, can be helpful or is the most appropriate form of intervention. That oversight or error, I want to claim, is not only a significant liability and shortcoming because of its anachronistic overtones and its intimation of the failure of applied philosophy to keep sufficiently abreast of important developments in social science in this area, but because the adoption of the traditional charity approach impoverishes the philosophical discussion by frequently limiting it to issues of how those who are affluent can beneficently help the poor. In what follows, I defend the claim that this preoccupation is not just symptomatic of a linguistic deficiency or empirical oversight, but an inability to consider fully the systemic causes of global poverty and the contribution of the affluent to its perpetuation. At that point, I will suggest that though a full examination of such a claim would be beyond the scope of this work, an appropriate widening of focus of the prevalent philosophical inquiry into the moral implications of poverty would rightly have us shift weight away from beneficence towards justice. This is a significant indictment, and while the nature of this limited inquiry constrains my ability to undertake an exegesis of the intricate workings and moral underpinnings of the global economy of the kind that may make it more plausible, I shall return to say something more about it soon. Until then, this warning should suffice.

**Singer: The Drowning Child**

Peter Singer is perhaps best known for attempting to constrict or eliminate that zone between supererogation and moral minimums15 which normally gives each agent moral

---

14 For ample discussion of such failures, see Graham Hancock, Lords of Poverty, (Berkshire: Mandarin, 1989), pp. 139-151.

15 In the course of this paper, I make no effort to delve into the meanings of terms such as 'obligation', 'duty' and 'ought', because to do so would force a retreat into philosophy of language and metaethics.
permissibility to make decisions about how saintly to be. In laying the groundwork for his principle of obligation in *Famine, Affluence and Morality*\(^{16}\), Singer articulates what he feels to be convictions that could be said to be held by almost all of us, and moves from there in incremental and, on his account, justifiable and reasonable steps, to a conclusion which demands a great deal more action and sacrifice of the average northern citizen than is either presently the case or is soon likely to be. The probable unpopularity of his conclusions is not a factor that suggests to him tempering his conclusions or mitigating the obligations it generates.

Singer’s argument is based on three premises – two moral and one factual. The first is that suffering and death from lack of food, shelter and health care are bad. All other things being equal, it would be a better world if such suffering did not exist.

The second (factual) premise is that the citizens of richer countries can do something to bring it about that fewer people die from lack of the necessities of existence\(^{17}\). Given that most of those inhabiting affluent nations are able to meet their own needs of human sustenance and have excess for discretionary or luxury items, most of these individuals, if they so chose, could redirect some of their resources towards assisting the least fortunate.

The third premise holds the essence of the normative argument. Instead of working from the ground up from any specific moral theory to a principle of obligation, Singer purports to avoid debate about ethical foundations by articulating a premise that he believes could be almost universally accepted:

---

\(^{16}\)While the central claims made by Singer are based upon his most widely discussed work on the topic - *Famine, Affluence and Morality* - additional comments and afterthoughts of his are gleaned from subsequent (and similar) writings, including the postscript to the original paper in Aiken and La Follette 1977, pp. 33-36; “Reconsidering the Famine Relief Argument” in Peter G. Brown & Henry Shue (eds), *Food Policy, The Responsibility of the United States in Life and Death Choices*, (New York: The Free Press, 1977); and Chapter 8 of *Practical Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

\(^{17}\)In *Famine Affluence and Morality*, Singer’s argument arises from, and is directed towards addressing, recent famine. In subsequent commentary and work, he makes it clear that the argument also applies to lessening and reducing the cycle of poverty through long-term development aid.
If we could prevent something harmful or bad from happening without sacrificing something of comparable moral importance, then it is our obligation (in other words we ought, morally\textsuperscript{18}) to do it.

He indicates that the condition ‘without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance’ is fulfilled so long as the act in question does not result in anything else comparably bad happening, doing something that is wrong in itself, or failing to promote some moral good comparable in significance to the bad event prevented.

His widely traversed example of the principle in action is that of an individual walking by a child drowning in a shallow pond. If the only foreseeable negative consequence of attempting the uncomplicated rescue would be that the adult passerby muddies her clothes, then rescuing the child is something the passerby ought, he suggests, to do. The moral significance of soiled clothing is insignificant in comparison to the moral value of saving the life of the child. Of course, not all potential courses of action, nor even most, would be similarly easy ethical calculations to solve. Singer argues that on the surface, the principle does not seem like an unreasonable or stringent moral imperative - it does not require anyone to promote what is good, only to prevent what is bad, in particular circumstances.

Taken together, the three premises lead Singer to the conclusion that most of those in the developed world are obliged to contribute to poverty eradication up to the point where they can do no more without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, which he takes to be close to a point of marginal utility, where giving any more would cause as much harm to oneself as one would be alleviating elsewhere. The result of this would be that the consumer society - the purchase of trivial items rather than basic needs - would attenuate or be eliminated.

Singer (probably correctly) assumes that the majority of citizens of the North would likely reject this principle because of its strenuous requirements. In response, though not because he does not hold this stronger principle to be valid, he proposes a moderate version. On this account:

\textsuperscript{18} If there is the possibility of there being a lenient and a stronger sense of ‘ought’, Singer is using here the stronger version. He equates ‘we ought, morally’ with ‘it would be wrong not to’ – terminology which I shall also adopt for the purposes of this discussion.
If it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it.

This, he claims, allows considerably greater room for one to maneuver without being required to make saintly sacrifices. Nevertheless, Singer argues, even on the lesser principle, the denizens of the richer world would be required to make substantially greater efforts to assist the poor than they do at present.

Singer’s weaker principle has met with some now common criticism. As John Arthur has pointed out, the most compelling problems to which it gives rise is that obligations of benevolence can be avoided with little effort. Arthur implicitly recognizes that Singer’s failure to provide an underpinning moral theory by which to evaluate an action - an intentional move designed to save Singer from extensive defense to establish a premise - leaves it open to its most potent objection.

The concern here is that the weaker principle provides such wide berth for some to escape the obligation Singer is attempting to establish that in effect it establishes little or no obligation at all, and quite likely falls far short of providing the reason-giving force required to justify Singer’s stringent conclusion. The selfsame example used by Singer in support of the weaker principle - that a sacrifice of wearing fashionable clothes has no moral significance and therefore is morally required if its proceeds could be redirected to famine relief - is turned on its head in this objection. Wearing fashionable clothes could well, on some non-irrational accounts of morality, be considered morally significant, particularly if one considers not only the fact of being well-dressed for its intrinsic aesthetic value, but also the reduction in pleasure that not being well-dressed might effect in an individual obliged to make the sacrifice.

---

19 See John Arthur, “Rights and the Duty to Bring Aid” in Aiken and La Follette 1977, pp. 37-48. Arthur goes on to propose an alternative to the stronger principle to mitigate its demands: “If it is in our power to prevent death of an innocent without sacrificing anything of substantial significance then we ought morally to do it”. Something can qualify as being of substantial significance if it relates to either some ‘objective’ need that people have, including those things without which they could not function physically such as food, clothing, health care and housing, or a ‘subjective’ need, to which someone is entitled if it is necessary for a minimally ‘modestly happy life’. Items are of substantial significance on his score if and only if their absence will affect a person’s long-term happiness. On his account, the obligation to generously assist the needy would appear to exist, (curiously) as with Singer’s weaker version, only for those who admit that their materialistic excesses are just that, resulting in a situation in which the more charitable and least materialistic would generate for themselves the most stringent duties to provide aid to others. A grounding of reason-giving principles of this sort in dispositions that individuals do have, and its concomitant inability to properly distance the normative from the descriptive or to challenge the status quo, seems to me a rather significant failing for a moral principle.
The weaker principle thus gives rise to, but fails to address the question: in the absence of any given Archimedean point from which to survey the value horizon, on whose, or on which account are we to judge whether something can be said to have moral significance? In a post-script to the paper\textsuperscript{20}, Singer admits that as a result of his attempt to have the weaker principle appeal to those of a variety of moral stripes by not premising the arguments on a comprehensive ethical theory, the effect of the conclusions drawn from it will be limited to those who are ready to admit the moral insignificance of the potential sacrifices that can be made - such as forgoing fashionable attire - in the name of famine or poverty relief.

Despite his admission that the weaker principle is thus rendered too weak, Singer maintains the validity of the stronger version of the principle and argument, and of its applicability to consequentialists and non-consequentialists alike, because the enjoiner to prevent what is bad takes effect only when something comparably significant is not being sacrificed. Thus, actions involving violations of promise, greater inequity or injustice and others with which non-consequentialists frequently concern themselves, if they are held by the individual considering the argument to be of moral significance comparable to the harm that would be prevented, should not be tolerated under such a rule.

The argument as thus presented forms the central content of Singer’s claims and for obvious reasons has effectively given rise to a wide spectrum of counter-arguments and objections in the philosophical literature regarding the moral status of living a life of relative economic ease and enjoyment.

Before turning attention to some of these, I want to pause to consider another approach to the question by turning our gaze towards the sometimes absurd but frequently innovative and compelling arguments advanced by Peter Unger. While a full analysis of his work will be beyond the scope of what I could here hope to accomplish, a background of the key premises and methodology which undergird it, as outlined chiefly in the first and second chapters of \textit{Living High and Letting Die}, will place us in good stead to delve into detailed analysis of general and promising objections made, or that

\textsuperscript{20} Singer, as reprinted in Aiken and La Follette 1977, pp. 35-36.
could be made, against both works in question, and often towards any similarly demanding principle or theories of obligation towards the poor.

**Unger: The Envelope and The Vintage Sedan**

Peter Unger, as he states, is in accord with the demands of Singer’s stronger principle, but believes that the means Singer uses to arrive at that conclusion requires bolstering to provide it with greater reason-giving force. The portion of his work, outlined in his second chapter, that I shall focus upon here is devoted to building on Singer’s foundation primarily by using various sets of case study pairs likely to evoke our contrasting lenient and demanding “untutored” moral reactions. These parallel cases are then closely scrutinized to determine whether our polar reactions are justified on any reasonable grounds. The conclusion of the skillfully crafted argument is that there is no morally relevant difference between certain situations where we ordinarily judge that it would be wrong not to help someone who we are confronted with that would suffer less were it not for our intervention, and others in which we ordinarily judge it to be morally praiseworthy, but not obligatory, to provide aid to avert the suffering of an innocent other.

First, Unger begins with a factual tutorial on child death and prevention of it. The leading cause of death for children in the world is diarrhea due to dehydration, a lethal condition for approximately three million children a year, mostly in the developing world. Several packages of oral rehydration therapy (ORT) as distributed by many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and particularly by UNICEF in the South, properly consumed, are usually sufficient to relieve this specific condition, resulting in a saving of a life, or more.

---

21 Two important observations should be made here:

1) The effectiveness of the ORT preparation depends upon its being mixed with safe, potable water, upon proper education of caregivers in providing it, and several additional environmental factors. I am assuming here that the costs of ensuring the presence of these conditions, as well as those related to the fact that some ORT applications will not result in the saving of lives, is incorporated into the liberal estimate of the costs of ‘saving a life’. While this is clearly an oversimplification of what is involved in preventing child death, as nothing of moral significance turns on the exact numbers, I leave the question of the actual monetary costs aside. More is said about such costs, from a practical and moral perspective, in Unger 1996, Chapter 6 and Chapter III here.

2) Promoting human health and development in poorer nations involves far more of course than providing ORT packages. The issue of addressing the root and systemic causes of poverty is addressed in detail in Chapter II.
accurately causing the child to die later than sooner. In order to be realistic about the costs involved, Unger has us multiply the cost of the ORT package itself, 15 cents, by twenty to easily incorporate the need for overhead, transportation, training, and other administrative requirements. This brings us to the figure of three dollars\(^{22}\) to save the life of a child through an effective aid organization. So, if you or I had sent $100 to UNICEF last month, asking that it be used for ORT, this month there would be 30 fewer children who, at risk of premature demise through no fault of their own, would live significantly longer lives rather than experience a painful death. This will also be true for next month, and each successive month for the conceivable future, unless something radical and unlikely changes the face of global poverty and deprivation.

With that empirical backdrop, Unger moves to provide us with the two central puzzles that form the basis of his work - *The Envelope* and *The (Vintage) Sedan*. These are carefully constructed to provide us with data from various thought experiments - similar in some respects and dissimilar in other important ways. Because of the centrality of these to the argument, I reproduce each in full below:

*The Envelope*. In your mailbox, there’s something from (the U.S. Committee for) UNICEF. After reading it through, you correctly believe that, unless you soon send in a check for $100, then, instead of each living many more years, over thirty more children will die soon. But, you throw the material in your trash basket, including the convenient return envelope provided, you send nothing, and, instead of living many years, over thirty more children soon die than would have had you sent in the requested $100.\(^{23}\)

Unger notes that this kind of scenario, when presented to individuals encountering it for the first time\(^{24}\) is most often met with the reaction that it may be good to support such efforts, but it isn’t wrong not to. He contrasts that response with the one commonly provided when “fresh folks” are presented with the following hypothetical situation:

*The (Vintage) Sedan*. Not truly rich, your one luxury in life is a vintage Mercedes sedan that, with much time, attention and money, you’ve restored to mint condition. In particular, you’re pleased by the auto’s fine leather seating. One day, you stop at the intersection of two small country

\(^{22}\) For those interested in absolute costs, Unger is presumably referring to the U.S. dollar.

\(^{23}\) Unger 1996, p. 25.

\(^{24}\) Unger clarifies that the responses received by presenting his examples and dilemmas to a variety of individuals were not elicited or compiled as part of a formal, scientifically rigorous process.
roads, both lightly traveled. Hearing a voice screaming for help, you get out and see a man who's wounded and covered with a lot of his blood. Assuring you that his wound's confined to one of his legs, the man also informs you that he was a medical student for two full years. And, despite his expulsion for cheating on his second year final exams, which explains his indigent status since, he's knowledgeably tied his shirt near the wound so as to stop the flow. So, there's no urgent danger of losing his life, you're informed, but there's great danger of losing his limb. This can be prevented, however, if you drive him to a rural hospital fifty miles away.

"How did the wound occur?" you ask. An avid bird-watcher, he admits that he trespassed on a nearby field and, in carelessly leaving, cut himself on rusty barbed wire. Now, if you'd aid this trespasser, you must lay him across your fine back seat. But, then, your fine upholstery will be soaked through with blood, and restoring the car will cost over five thousand dollars. So, you drive away. Picked up the next day by another driver, he survives but loses the wounded leg.\footnote{Unger 1996, p. 24-25.}

As most people respond, the actions of the Mercedes owner are seriously morally reprehensible, in contrast to those of the envelope recipient, which is often judged leniently. This, in spite of the following: 1) the most severe harm caused to any individual is the loss of a leg in \textit{The Sedan}, compared to the loss of life in \textit{The Envelope}; 2) the children that die in the Envelope scenario could not have been attributed any blame for their own deaths, whereas the trespassing student in \textit{The Sedan} may be held at least partially accountable for his own misfortune; 3) the consequences of not acting in the Envelope were that thirty people suffered, in comparison to one in \textit{The Sedan}; and 4) the financial cost to the potential rescuer in \textit{The Envelope} is fifty times less than it is in \textit{The Sedan}. The highlighting of these particular factors, which on the surface suggest that our reactions to \textit{The Envelope} should be at least severe as towards that of \textit{The Sedan}, provide reason to be puzzled by our intuitive responses.

Unger dedicates a good portion of his discussion to defending and elaborating upon the thesis that there is no convincing explanation that could justify the discrepancy in our immediate reactions to such cases. Thus, our moral intuitions on the subject need to be revised.

This latter explanatory portion of this argument is more delicate and nuanced than first appears. An explanation is provided for our usual immediate reactions to the cases by positing that they are not the result of what we truly think is right, or our 'Basic Moral
Values’. What intervenes in enabling our intuitions to reflect our real values is psychologically distortional tendencies. These are psychological dispositions inherent in our natures that serve to cloak our deepest moral commitments. Unger argues that our moral commitments already enjoin us to make substantial sacrifices for the poor, but most of us don’t consciously recognize this\textsuperscript{26}. His argument then is designed to liberate us from our own ‘illusion of innocence’- a position that he refers to as \textit{Liberationism}. In contrast, those who hold that our intuitive responses to such cases, as they appear on the surface, are reflective of our values, attempt to preserve that appearance and thus support the notion he coins \textit{Preservationism}. The distinction between our responses to the two puzzle cases is thus accounted for by postulating that the distortional dispositions which keep moral truth at bay work to generate our lenient response to \textit{The Envelope}, but other cases such as \textit{The Sedan} don’t encourage the working of these dispositions, and so our response to them is more accurately able to reflect our true values.

Unger provides an example of the kind of distortional dispositions that keep moral truth hidden by referring to the general high regard accorded to Thomas Jefferson and George Washington (amongst Americans, presumably). Both, he notes, owned slaves, which they could have freed if they so chose. Although Washington provided instructions to have his own slaves emancipated and well taken care of after his own and his wife’s deaths, he did nothing to secure their freedom during his lifetime. While our common moral judgment is that slavery is morally repugnant, the general assessment of Jefferson and Washington is that they were good and honorable people. Unger posits that we tend to judge people who engaged in actions that are now accepted as morally problematic leniently when those actions took place prior to the time when the consensus about the moral status of the actions shifted to become condemnatory. We tend to judge these two leaders’ conduct leniently because they lived in a time when slavery was widespread, thought to be morally acceptable, and when social pressure would have made it very hard for them to be without slaves. This tendency to assess the moral status of an action subject to its temporal relation to a specific historical attitudinal shift is an example of a

\textsuperscript{26} Unger notes in introductory comments that he is not assuming the truth of realism, although that is what he is inclined towards. He argues that even those who think that moral properties do not exist in the universe outside of ourselves will agree that it is wrong, for instance, to allow somebody to drown because it would be monetarily beneficial for you, when they could in fact be easily rescued, and it is irrelevant whether this prohibition is understood to be rooted in subjective or objective moral truth. As this seems a reasonable enough supposition, for our purposes at least, I shall not explore it further here.
distortional tendency at work. Unger prognosticates that one day, our morally more enlightened descendants, obsessively intolerant of any easily preventable child death\(^{27}\) in the world from malnutrition and poverty, will judge our present-day actions towards the poor leniently; ‘Allowing people to die of chronic malnutrition and poverty-related causes’, they will say, ‘was considered morally acceptable back then. Because such behaviour was so widespread, it was difficult for the 21\(^{\text{st}}\) century folk to break free from the material comforts and non-essential goods they commonly allowed themselves at the expense of allowing many others to die’.

Returning to the weighing of the demands of the two dilemmas presented, Unger proceeds to explore a series of different characteristics, present in one but not the other of the two cases, which might explain and justify our dissimilar moral evaluations of them. He dismisses each of these potential preservationist objections as insufficient to ground a more lenient reaction towards *The Envelope*.

**Distance and Experience**

The first set of such characteristics involves the physical and social distance between the benefactor and beneficiary, as well as the means by which the former comes to understand the circumstances of the latter. For the first of these, Unger has us imagine a case similar to *The Envelope* in all respects, with the exception that you receive the envelope while holidaying at your timeshare in Haiti, at a compound in very close proximity to an area where many children’s lives could be saved by your possible contribution. Most respond to this that your location when receiving the request, and the relative propinquity of the benefactors, make no difference to the moral status of the action of refusing to offer a donation. In a similar case, Unger has us imagine a scenario similar to *The Sedan*, though changing the geographical location of the event to South America, where you happen across an erstwhile Spanish medical student who beseeches you for assistance. Again, most of those responding to the altered scenario see nothing different in the moral status of the response to refuse to help.

\(^{27}\) Unger’s argument uses children as his target aid beneficiaries in order to avoid focus on citizens in the developing world who surely cannot be held even partially accountable for their plight. Presumably, combined with the claim that many of the poor are poor largely because they have never had the opportunity to be otherwise, the argument might also hold for adults at risk of premature death or severe suffering due to poverty-related causes.
Unger then turns to the possibility that the important difference is that *The Sedan* offers an example of information about those in need gleaned *directly* whereas *The Envelope* presents such information to us about the needs of distant others *mediated* through agencies such as UNICEF or the media. To address this, Unger constructs a scenario analogous to *The Sedan* but in which you learn of the trespasser’s dire need over a CB radio that each of you is tuned into, rather than by driving by. The student indicates, by citing landmarks, that you are 10 miles from him, within easy driving distance, but you ignore the request, and he loses his leg. Having heard of his plight through voice signals over a CB radio rather than learning of his situation directly does not alter the reaction of most to the case - it continues to be just as morally unacceptable as if you had come across him in person. Unger dismisses this too as potentially grounding our intuitions on the basis that we are no less sure that information collected and disseminated through (trustworthy) international agencies and reported to us accurately describes a situation of multitudes of ill children at risk of early death from conditions easily preventable and within the grasp of the affluent to stem.

Unger goes on to claim that ‘experiential impact’ - having the needy individual directly enter one’s experience - cannot be the morally relevant feature because one’s communication with the trespasser over a CB Radio instead of in person does nothing to alter our intuitive assessment. In the CB Radio case, the man’s plight does not enter your experience; even the sounds you hear are the result of electronics. Amending the CB Radio description so that the trespasser transmits information about his plight to you via Morse code - in which case there is even less direct experience of the direness of the situation - as most respond, does not affect the moral status of the response. Unger suggests that the experiential feature of a salient crisis may make a difference to the *psychological* impact it has on a potential benefactor, but is of no relevance *morally*.

None of these four features then - physical proximity, social distance, the direct/indirect nature of the experience or the means of relaying information about the needy individuals - seems to isolate the moral difference that we might look towards to justify the divergent first-blush responses of most to the cases of *The Envelope* and *The Sedan*. Of course, there are many more possibilities regarding what might justify our different reactions to the two cases and therefore vindicate or reasonably explain our common intuitions. Leaving few stones unturned in his quest for this evasive characteristic, Unger’s
exploration forges ahead to conjure ever more imaginative settings to stretch the rational faculties.

**Multitudes and Numbers**

The second set of characteristics that can reasonably be grouped together from Unger’s analysis revolves around numbers of people. In *The Envelope*, there are literally millions of other would-be potential benefactors who could respond to a UNICEF plea, while in *The Sedan* there is only one. To this, Unger asks readers to construct a hypothetical situation similar to the CB radio-equipped Sedan described above, with the exception that there are now three other drivers, each wealthier than you, five miles closer to the student, and of similarly reupholstered accoutrement who also receive a plea by radio for assistance and simultaneously turn it down, leaving the supplicant stranded and permanently disabled. As most respond, such an action would be positively heinous, irrespective of the number of other drivers who were equally unhelpful, shedding doubt on the postulate that the number of potential ‘saviours’ in a particular circumstance has any moral relevance that could justify most people’s intuitive response to *The Envelope*.

In regards to the claim that a morally relevant difference might be located in the fact that *The Sedan* offers an instantiation of a situation in which helping an individual will result in that person’s becoming well, and that being the end of the matter, so to speak (a “cleaned scene”), versus a situation in *The Envelope* in which no matter how many times one responds to mailed appeals from development organizations, there will always be more people who could benefit from such subsequent contributions (“a continuing mess”), Unger’s response is that the apparent moral difference is illusory. The trespasser’s infected leg is just as much a part of the continued mess in the world, as there are thousands of other people who suffer from, and will continue to experience, infected legs. The fact that these individuals are not all in the same physically proximate area is of no moral relevance, as prior examples have demonstrated. The wounded student is just as much a part of a continuing mess as a poverty-stricken child and this feature fails to isolate the morally relevant difference for which we are searching.

The fact that one’s assistance in *The Envelope* could be targeted towards any one of thousands of potential recipients (“amorphous aid”), in comparison to a student whose leg you could help save and know that you assisted *that particular* individual (“causally focused aid”), is equally illusory, Unger suggests, as is the fact of *knowing* the identity of
the person being saved. In an Envelope-like case in which potential contributors are promised that their donation will be directed towards, and save the life of, a particular child rather than be pooled to save the life of many, and even when the solicitation promises that a photograph and biography of the ‘saved’ child will be made available to the donors, most feel no differently about the moral status of leaving the request unheeded than when it is presented in the original Envelope format. Again, Unger concludes that we cannot find justification for our intuitive leniency towards The Envelope recipients in the fact that their assistance is directed towards either one particular individual or one identifiable individual. Neither of these seems to be a relevant concern in judging the moral actions of potential ‘rescuers’.

**Time and Sorts of Situation**

Perhaps the elusive distinction is rooted, Unger speculates, in some element of time - that is - *The Sedan* case seems to involve an emergency by notion of it being the result of a situation of relative stability punctuated by dire need, and an urgent situation by notion of calling for immediate assistance. Testing the hypothesis, an Envelope-like case is supposed, in which an appeal from UNICEF requests that you submit a $100 contribution within the next few weeks to avert the impending premature death of many previously well-to-do Haitian children in disastrous shape due to a natural calamity such as a hurricane. As most respond, the moral status of one’s negative response would be no different from that in the original Envelope. To this, Unger adds that in fact children in the developing world at risk of death due to undernourishment have likely been in a deprived state for a good period of time, whereas the former medical student had a higher chance of having his basic needs met prior to the accident. This would suggest, if anything, a harsher judgment for those unwilling to assist the children rather than the student. In any case, emergencies, when isolated as the sole difference between cases, seem to have no impact on our moral responses to the cases.

It might still be the case that we justifiably react stringently and more surely to situations of *urgency* in which needs presented to us require immediate response on pain of sure death or calamity befalling the injured. Imagine then, Unger suggests, a case similar to *The Envelope* in which you receive a request to contribute $500 to a special fund to avert the early death of poor children. The sizeable cost is due to the fact that your particular donation will be attended to personally and immediately and used to administer ORT within 24 hours to a chosen child in a poverty-stricken area facing certain death
from dehydration due to diarrhea. Again, these alterations have negligible effect on the respondents in comparison to their replies to the original Envelope. The time span between the act of helping and the rescue of a life appears morally irrelevant.

Perhaps *The Envelope* and *Sedan* strike us intuitively as different cases, and elicit divergent moral responses from those considering the actions of the respective potential rescuers, Unger posits, because they involve situations of an inherently different *kind*. In the Envelope, one is confronted with a *common* sort of situation in which people far away can be greatly aided by a donation to poverty relief – many of us regularly receive appeals to mitigate suffering. *The Sedan* by contrast involves a situation of a very *unusual* sort and set of circumstances. Might we justifiably respond more favourably to such isolated kinds of circumstances? On the contrary, *The Sedan* presents us with situations of a sort that are very common indeed, Unger retorts. Examples include the sort of situation in which you can take someone to the hospital or that involve vintage automobiles, but none of these such similarities between *The Sedan* and their analogues are morally relevant characteristics upon which we would base a decision about whether to offer aid. The same could be held for *The Envelope*, in which the only morally relevant sort of situation of which it is an instantiation is that of being in a position to prevent suffering without great cost to oneself. Any attempt to suggest that there is a morally relevant component of the Envelope which renders it the sort of case in which we are morally justified in avoiding action with impunity breaks down to the arguments that have already been addressed above and found to be wanting – there seems to be no such morally relevant characteristic. It remains to those who might object to this line of reasoning, he implies, to demonstrate how the sorts of situations of which *The Sedan* or *Envelope* is an illustration is of any moral relevance.

**Morally Relevant Distinctions**

Unger’s conclusion from the examination of his thorough series of detailed and contrasting case pairs is that the absence of any identifiable difference between *The Sedan* and *The Envelope* by which one could reasonably ground our conflicting moral assessments of them suggests that our intuitions are failing us. If we are to maintain consistency, we must either reassess our evaluation of *The Sedan* ‘downwards’ and admit the moral permissibility of allowing someone to lose their leg in order to maintain one’s vintage car in prime condition, or re-evaluate our judgment of behaviour in *The*
Envelope ‘upwards’ and admit that we are morally obliged to do what we can to save the lives of innocent others at little cost to ourselves. Finding the former untenable on any reasonable view of morality, Unger suggests that his analysis grounds a strong obligation of the affluent to contribute to lessening distant premature child deaths. If morality requires certain sacrifices of us in order to help save a man’s leg, we are surely required to make comparable sacrifices, and very likely considerably greater ones, all other things being equal, to help avert the premature death of distant children.\(^{28}\)

This brings us to the end of our précis of the arguments of Unger and Singer that lead them to the common conclusion that the wealthy act immorally in failing to contribute significant portions of their financial resources to the lessening of distant suffering. Unsurprisingly, their arguments as described here have given rise to a wide array of objections that encompass or touch in some way upon almost every significant issue in moral philosophy, from the troubling features of consequentialism to methodological issues and questions about the scope of morality. Clearly, a full and comprehensive analysis of such a wide array of concerns is far beyond the scope of this work. Instead, in what follows, I focus on objections to Singer and Unger’s thesis made at the most foundational and theoretical level which appear to be particularly common or promising means of dismissing these authors’ claims. In the process, I return periodically to assess the impact of these objections against the seemingly unequivocal and demanding brand of morality championed by Unger and Singer.

---

\(^{28}\)The remainder of Unger’s work is dedicated, through the use of over 50 additional (often bizarre and convoluted) thought experiments, to defending even stronger claims about the obligations of the affluent. The end result of his detailed analysis appears to be: “To behave in a way that’s not seriously wrong, a well-off person, like you and me, must contribute to vitally effective groups, like Oxfam and UNICEF, most of the money and property she now has, and most of what comes her way for the foreseeable future” (Unger 1996, p. 56). As Unger’s argument arising from The Envelope and The Sedan cases forms the basis of his entire thesis and is itself sufficient to raise considerable objection, and due to limitations of space, I set aside for the moment his more stringent conclusions in order to focus on general objections to the kinds of demands generated by considerations of The Envelope, The Sedan, and Singer’s drowning child scenario.
Chapter I: Promising Objections

The Lifeboat

I can find no fault here unless it is that (James Fishkin, in objecting to Singer’s stronger principle) is far too patient with what seems to me the manifest absurdity of suggestions that all of us who are not ‘yet’ poor have an open-ended obligation to support: not only all the people in other countries who, in large part owing to failures to check fertility in those countries, are at present desperately poor and often hungry; but also, presumably, all those further people who will be produced if that fertility is not checked, but instead encouraged by unconditional and indiscriminate charity. If that is really what morality commands, then not only the law but also morality is an ass!

Antony Flew

‘Ought’, it is often suggested, implies ‘can’. The arguments of both Singer and Unger are predicated on the premise or assumption that the affluent can, if they choose, do something to prevent or mitigate poverty or child suffering due to poverty. Yet that premise is by no means widely accepted, and a closer look at the assumption will be an important part of an attempt to examine possible objections to the authors’ thesis in question. Along with exposing and unraveling conceptually flawed and muddled reasoning, this attempt will supplement straightforward philosophical inquiry with an examination of some of the empirical findings upon which the normative claims underlying this objection - rather shakily, I will contend - rest.

The issue of the potential deleterious effects of well-meaning attempts at such philanthropy has famously been the subject of Garret Hardin’s contrarian treatment of the issue using the analogy of the lifeboat. In what follows, I shall be particularly concerned with the kinds of problems posed by Hardin and others in their claims that we ought not to provide aid on the reasoning that it is self-defeating or ineffective. If, in the process of


30 As presented in “Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor” in Aiken and La Follette 1977, pp. 11-21.
this analysis, Hardin’s analogy and/or conclusions seem reasonable or convincing, we will have good reason to doubt the need to take heed of Singer or Unger’s conclusions. It is difficult to see how the affluent should provide aid to the less fortunate if in fact the result of that undertaking will be to defeat its ultimate aims. As it turns out, I shall suggest that the lifeboat analogy is seriously flawed on several fronts.

Before proceeding, it is important to note the distinction between two possible types of aid considered and discussed particularly by Singer and Hardin - food aid, which can itself be both of the emergency relief variety or general food assistance provided in times of need but not famine situations, and development aid, which I shall use to describe other types of assistance devoted to the more general goal of the alleviation of poverty, and which can include all manner of aid ranging from microcredit to primary health care programs. Unfortunately, these categories of aid are often either confused or conflated in the philosophical literature. For our purposes, it will suffice for now to note that Hardin, in making claims about aid, makes no obvious distinction between food aid and development aid. Implicit in Hardin’s thesis is the claim that the provision of both types of aid would be equally unpalatable as moral acts. He goes so far as to claim that industrialized world support of the Green Revolution, which sought to increase crop production, was misguided in that it merely fuelled the fire of population growth rather than stemming it. Singer, in contrast, makes explicit his claim that the arguments he puts forward in support of providing aid, whilst originally written at a time of famine in Bangladesh and meant to apply to such cases, should also apply to the provision of development assistance. Unger too argues for the deployment of international development resources to attack more than dehydration-related diarrhea in children, though he does not provide much by way of additional detail to this suggestion.

In regards to the distinction between emergency and non-emergency food aid, much the same problem applies. Neither Singer nor Hardin again make it clear to which of these they are referring. At the outset, I shall not differentiate the two kinds, although the need to do so will eventually become clear.

31 See Singer, in Aiken and La Follette 1977, p. 35.
32 See Unger 1996, pp. 146-149.
Finally, I have suggested previously that much philosophical analysis of development problems and of obligations of the rich to poor nations in the past has been guilty of an unjustified degree or detachment from observations about the way the world is and of the findings of social science. Thus the emphasis here on bringing the rigours of careful analysis to bear arguments that are debated amongst not only philosophers but population ecologists, development practitioners, anthropologists and a wide swath of academics and social activists, rendering the line between philosophical and other analysis very fine and permeable indeed.

Carrying Capacity and the Lifeboat Analogy

Garret Hardin’s advocacy of non-interventionist policies is based on the claim that aid contributes to, rather than mitigates, suffering because it results in higher survival rates, a total increase in population, and eventually greater strain on the natural resources (carrying capacity) of the region and of the earth as a whole. Combined with already-expanding and incessant population explosion in much of the developing world, a food aid policy would serve only to perpetuate the cycle of poverty leading to famine, with each successive cycle being more intense than the former. If this is the result of food aid, Hardin claims, then the appropriate course of action would be to offer none whatsoever.

A cancer, he offers, is an uncontrolled multiplication of cells; the population explosion is an uncontrolled multiplication of people. Treating only the symptoms of cancer may make the victim more comfortable at first, but eventually he dies - often horribly. A similar fate awaits a world with a population explosion if only the symptoms are treated. We must shift our efforts from treatment of the symptoms to the cutting out of the cancer.

Hardin makes the claim that the problem with extensive population growth in a country is that the carrying capacity of the land will be exceeded and that this is a mounting problem in the developing world. Hardin’s thesis would suggest that the proportion of people to

---

33 I am not implicitly suggesting, in a Kai Nielsen sort of way, that bringing the rigours of careful analysis to bear on the subject matters in which it comes into contact is the only real role of Philosophy, but rather that both Social Science and Philosophy might sometimes benefit when the latter is more firmly hooked onto to the former: “Notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, there may still be time for moral philosophers to stop ‘moralizing’ and undertake serious analysis of the ethical problems posed by development, underdevelopment, and planning. In order to succeed, they must go to the factory with Simone Weil or to the market place with Eric Weil. Better still, they must go to the planning board or irrigation project.” (Denis Goulet, A New Moral Order: Development Ethics and Liberation Theology, (New York: Orbis Books, 1974), p. 16).

productive land available in a country is an important variable that ought to be taken more seriously, that this is not being taken into account in developing countries with run-away populations, and that such an oversight will lead to ever-greater problems of poverty and famine in these countries. Hardin’s claim however does not seem to be well supported by available evidence - the correlation between population density and levels of poverty appears to be inconsistent, if it exists at all. Both in the developing and developed worlds, many regions characterized by elevated densities are known to be relatively affluent whereas much less densely populated regions in Africa, for instance, are home to some of the poorest populations on earth. Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan and West Germany are examples of newly industrialized or developed nations with high densities of population of relative affluence. Bolivia is home to twelve people per square mile compared to 1,117 in Holland. In general, the link that Hardin posits or assumes as existing between density and poverty has been difficult to substantiate.

Hardin’s likening of the rich nations of the earth to a lifeboat is also questionable. The analogy is a weak one, for the carrying capacity of a lifeboat (with, say, well-defined provisions of food and water) may be much more easily determined than that of a nation, group of nations, or the earth. It would be difficult to come to a conclusion about what the optimal number of people on the earth is, or what its population density should optimally be. The ‘carrying capacity’ notion of the earth is especially problematic given that factors which might be variables in the calculus of ‘optimal earth population’ - e.g. total possible food production, total possible energy available - are in constant flux as a result of research into areas such as plant breeding for optimal genetic strains or exploration into alternative energy sources. Whilst the earth clearly cannot sustain population growth ad infinitum, the question of what maximum population levels are consistent with survival on

37 Derek Parfit, albeit working from a different framework than the discussion above, offers interesting insights into this puzzle, although his question is also based on the assumption that increasing population results in decreased quality of life, which may not, on our account, necessarily be true. See Derek Parfit, Reasons and Persons, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), esp. pp. 381-390. Also related to this and of interest is Julian Simon, a popular rival of Paul Ehrlich, the populist twentieth century Malthusian, who contends: “Have I gone crazy? What business do I have trying to help arrange it that fewer human beings will be born, each of whom might be a Mozart or a Michelangelo or an Einstein - or simply a joy to his or her family and community, and a person who will enjoy life?” Regrettably, a closer examination of the philosophical implications of such a statement is beyond this paper. See Julian Simon, The Ultimate Resource, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).
the planet is also highly dependent on assumptions regarding the lifestyles of its inhabitants and their rates of consumption of non-renewable resources. This highlights the oft-disregarded role of developed nations in determining the size and capacity of the ‘lifeboat’: “In a full world, consumption, population, and equity are linked”.

An additional concern with the lifeboat analogy is that no rich nation, at present, is self-sufficient and without constant exchange of goods with those ‘drowning’. This complicates the matter for Hardin, for it raises the possibility that saving some of the drowning might actually be beneficial for those in the lifeboat, or that those in the lifeboat may be considered to have obligations to those drowning that arise from this relationship of trade - an argument discussed further in the following chapter.

The question of whether Hardin’s thesis - regarding the moral status of providing famine relief - is sound, rests partially on the issue of whether such aid could in fact be helpful. As Joseph Fletcher reasonably suggests:

> We ought not to enter upon courses of action which forseeably end in the negation of the good being sought. If it can be shown that the beneficiaries of our generosity would, on balance, suffer more than they benefited, and if it is our proper business as moral agents to optimize the good, rather than blindly following a general moral rule or value (virtue), then in such a situation to share food would be immoral. We should give if it helps but not if it hurts.

Although Fletcher reveals his utilitarian bias here, his conclusion does indeed seem plausible. Providing aid would make little sense if we knew it were harmful, for then in

---


Question (Unnamed Press Representative): “Does the President believe that, given the amount of energy Americans consume per capita, how much it exceeds any other citizen in any other country in the world, does the President believe we need to correct our lifestyles to address the energy problem?”.

Answer (Fleischer): “That's a big no. The President believes that it's an American way of life, and that it should be the goal of policy-makers to protect the American way of life. The American way of life is a blessed one.” As quoted in Timothy Noah, “Conservation is for Sissies”, Slate, May 8, 2001.


some sense, it would not be aid, and we would be dealing with the different and uninteresting question - should we harm famine victims?\[41\]

Establishing that food aid could be harmful in the ways suggested could be achieved through at least two avenues: either by (1) claiming that properly administered aid (i.e. aid which reaches its recipients in its intended way) leads eventually to the infliction of greater suffering on the basis of its long-term effect on population (the neo-Malthusian thesis propounded by Hardin), or (2) that aid, even of the short-term/food variety, is in some way irremediably more damaging than helpful (a claim upheld by Joseph Fletcher).

I want to proceed with an analysis of each of these claims in turn.

**The Malthusian Paradigm**

Hardin’s theory has its roots in Malthusian population theories. Thomas Malthus argued the point that humankind is constantly reproducing and will continue to do so unless limits are placed on growth:

> I think I may fairly make two postulata. First, that food is necessary to the existence of man. Secondly, that the passion between the sexes is necessary and will remain in its present state. Assuming then, my postulata as granted, I say, that the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence of man. Population, when unchecked, increased in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increased only in an arithmetic ratio.\[42\]

---

\[41\] See Richard Watson’s “Reason and Morality in a World of Limited Food” in Aiken and La Follette 1977, pp. 115-123, in which he argues that we should provide food aid even ‘if it hurts’. Watson is referring to the entire human race (rich and poor) being hurt by malnutrition caused by sharing food. Although impossible to examine fully here, Watson’s basic claim is that the good of survival cannot rank above the good of equity, thus requiring the rich to share their food with the poor regardless of whether or not some or all of the human race will starve in the process. On any account, Watson’s entire argument is based on the claim that there is not enough food for everyone in the world to be sufficiently fed, which, much evidence suggests, is not the case. For a discussion of unequal distribution rather than lack of food being the root of world hunger, see Frances Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins, World Hunger: Twelve Myths, (New York: Grove Press, 1986), pp. 9-14; John Cathie, The Political Economy of Food Aid, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982), p. 125; Nafis Sadik, Population Growth and Food Crisis, (New York: United Nations Fund for Population Activities, 1991), p. 1; Twose, p. 5; and Amartya Sen, Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation, Reprinted 1982, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 7 & Chaps 6-10.

Aside from the effects of war, famine and disease, Malthus argued, only the need to support oneself and one’s family would drive people to work and to limit the size of their families. Failing this motivation, external restraints must be placed on increasing population rates, especially amongst the poor (in 18th century Britain), for whom Malthus saw little hope: “It has appeared that from the inevitable laws of nature, some human beings must suffer from want. These are the unhappy persons who, in the great lottery of life, have drawn a blank.”

The Malthusian paradigm, popularized by Paul Ehrlich, underlies much of the earlier thinking of Hardin and in fact met with widespread support around the time of his writings. However, its conclusions have increasingly come to be questioned and its underlying assumptions attacked, largely by population theorists in the developing world, and most vocally since the United Nations World Population Conference held in Bucharest in 1974. That event saw Western leaders, intent on coming to a global consensus on the need for population control based on simple family planning techniques, overwhelmed and outnumbered by a ‘developing world contingent’ that shifted the focus from population issues to overall questions of poverty and inequitable economic distribution. For the latter, the Western emphasis on population as the source of poverty and strain on the earth’s resources was a red herring. It failed to identify the population issue within the greater context of socioeconomic development and global justice, and unjustifiably reversed the proper direction of causation from population growth to poverty, neglecting the contribution of the latter to the former.

More specifically, the Western neo-Malthusian assumption that increasing developing world survival rates would result in a concomitant increase in total population,

---

43 Ibid., p. 75.
44 See Ehrlich 1968.
45 Robert McNamara, former President of the World Bank, evidences this: “To put it simply, the greatest single obstacle to the economic and social advancement of the majority of peoples in the underdeveloped world is rampant population growth... The threat of unmanageable population pressures is very much like the threat of nuclear war... Both threats can and will have catastrophic consequences unless they are dealt with rapidly and rationally.” (Quoted in Bauer 1981, p. 42). To be fair, the World Bank has now changed its tone considerably, no longer unquestioningly espousing neo-Malthusian claims as the sole arbiter of the rate of developing world economic development. As we shall see, McNamara’s claims, though moving, are actually false, or at least misleading.
compounding the problem of poverty and ‘land carrying capacity’, has come under intense scrutiny. Arguments in favour of what has come to be known as the ‘child survival hypothesis’ argue in reply that the neo-Malthusian view is oversimplified. A closer look at demographics in the developed world suggests that where relatively high standards of living are the rule, the result is significant drops in population growth:

The prevailing birth rate, coupled with mortality and morbidity characteristics of the population, generally yield child survival expectancies, or probabilities, consistent with the size of completed family that parents want. Increasing the chance of child survival by improved nutrition, public health, sanitation, etc. so the argument runs, will lead to a perception by parents that fewer pregnancies and births are necessary to secure the desired size of the surviving family. The (child survival) thesis argues that if food aid and nutrition programs increase infant survival, parents will desire fewer children and will be motivated to use birth control to achieve that result. If this demand can be met by family planning programs, vasectomy clinics, etc., the result will be lowered fertility. 47

If the above postulate is true - that increases in certain indicators of quality of life lead to a ‘demographic transition’ as it is now commonly termed - then a portion of Hardin’s thesis would stand refuted, and what would be required would not be a Hardinian hands-off approach to famine, but, all other things being equal, a concerted attempt to increase child survival rates, decrease malnutrition, increase access to basic medical services, supplies and water, and a host of other interventions designed, essentially, to address poverty in the developing world.

The question, however, of whether the child survival hypothesis is in fact correct is not easily affirmed. Perhaps more revealing is that a refutation of the child survival hypothesis has proven even more difficult. Michael Brewer48 has reasonably argued that in order for the child survival hypothesis to be true, several conditions would have to be met - namely, that development assistance can have an impact on nutritional status, that increased nutritional status leads to a decrease in infant and child mortality, that this is followed by a general decrease in family size desired by parents, resulting in an increased demand for family planning services, and that these conditions lead ultimately to a decrease in fertility rates in developing nations. There is much evidence to suggest that all of these conditions can indeed be fulfilled.

48 Michael Brewer, in Brown and Shue 1977, p. 263.
Little doubt seems to prevail that a link exists between increasing levels of malnutrition and mortality, especially where attempts to increase nutrition levels are supplemented by efforts to ensure the availability of clean water and adequate sewage disposal. In fact, attempts to tackle any features that often characterize poverty - whether they be access to better food and medical supplies, increasing household incomes, better and more comprehensive education - have frequently had profoundly beneficial effects, in the long term, on nutritional status and mortality\textsuperscript{49}.

A more difficult link to establish is that between decreasing levels of mortality and a general decrease in the size of the (self-defined) optimal developing world family. In this light, much has been said in the philosophical and other literature, often in condescending tones suggesting parents in the developing world are ignorant and acting irrationally in having large families, which in turn is used as justification for withholding aid:

> For millions of parents... children are thought to be their only security, if and when the children manage to grow up. If only two out of five manage somehow to survive, they will have doomed three of their own children in order to better their own choice of not dying. It is a parlay en masse, using human lives as chips - a gambling game of life and death heavily reinforced by religious teaching. Individual procreators, looking to their personal gain and “security”, victimized their own children individually and their fellow countrymen collectively, as well as any foreign donors who send them food\textsuperscript{50}.

However, claims of this sort, over the past several decades, have come into ever-greater disrepute, as the plan of large families in fact comes to be seen as quite reasonable given the circumstances in which many developing world families find themselves. The sociologist Mahmood Mamdani conducted a now famous study in India that took the bold step of asking villagers themselves why they had many children. The respondents claimed that children meant security in many ways - as an added source of income through work in fields or begging, in later years as supporters of their elderly parents, and in times of catastrophe such as famine or flood. Cultural factors also came to light in the study, including prestige, status and sometimes power. For families who were marginalized economically or socially, Mamdani concluded, it made sense to have


\textsuperscript{50} Fletcher, in Lucas and Ogletree, p. 58-59.
as many children as possible, for it provided, a (real or imagined) source of security against the backdrop of a fatalistic outlook and a palpable fear of the future. Simply put: “...people are not poor because they have large families. Quite contrary: they have large families because they are poor”51. Whilst only one study, its conclusions have since been replicated by several others of similar ilk52.

Of late, increasing evidence has also been amassed to support the putative link between diminishing mortality rates and fertility decline:

Families do respond quickly to reductions in infant mortality, and they will normally respond sufficiently to bring the number of births back into line with desired family size. As fewer families experience child loss, and as that experience permeates the cultural milieu, the number of births will be adjusted downward by means of the mechanisms and means which families have to reduce their fertility.53

The desire for smaller families and its effect on a demand for greater availability of contraceptives is also well documented in the development literature54. Assuming, then, that this demand for family planning services can be met, there is reason to assume the viability of the child hypothesis model as a predictor of the possible effects of proper development assistance and intervention55.


54 See “Jamked Primary Health Care Service Delivery Model”, World Health Organization, date unavailable.

55 A comprehensive 1990 UNICEF study charting the relationship between the under-five mortality rate and total fertility rate over the period 1960 to 1989 which included almost all developing nations found that initial steep falls in under-five death rates were often not accompanied by any significant changes in fertility. Later, when under-five deaths fell still further, the pattern became increasingly mixed - with some countries showing significant falls in fertility and some not. In later stages, further reduction of under-five death rates, was, with very few exceptions, accompanied by even steeper falls in births. This lends strong support to the child hypothesis theory with the proviso that the effect of mortality is only seen over a long-term, i.e. approximately 10-15 year period. (UNICEF, State of the World’s Children 1991, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 39, “adapted by data supplied by the United Nations Population Division”).
The question of whether or not aid, per se, can have a substantial impact on malnutrition is a more contentious issue, especially in light of the increasing evidence of mismanaged development activities by both international and national, governmental and non-governmental, development organizations. Although further discussed below, a review of the literature suggests that there is also much reason to believe that aid can indeed have this effect, if ‘properly’ planned and executed.

Whilst there appears to be much evidence to support the child survival hypothesis, a litany of studies has also shown a link between decreased fertility and increased income, women’s education, and availability of health facilities. Studies have also made links between increased income distribution within a nation and declining fertility. One such World Bank study of 64 different countries found that when the poorest group’s income (the bottom 40% of population by income) goes up by one percentage point, the general fertility rate drops by almost three percentage points. When literacy and life expectancy were taken into consideration, the three factors together accounted for 80% of the variation in fertility among nations. The Indian state of Kerala has long been touted by supporters of multisectoral development initiatives as a prime example of what can be accomplished with heavy state intervention to support social programs and promote equity. Amongst its achievements have been some of the highest literacy rates in the developing world, low levels of infant mortality, and a fertility rate that is lower than China’s, with its policies promoting one-child families.

While examples such as these need not necessarily provide support specifically for the child survival hypothesis, they do strongly suggest that ‘development intervention’ can


59 This is because the link between, say, women’s education and fertility may or may not be because increased access to education for women results in better child nutrition, resulting in decreased fertility. There may be a more direct correlation, such as increased education resulting in women’s increased access and knowledge of family planning techniques leading to decreased fertility, or it may involve both of the above, or other factors not here mentioned. Any number of such factors then, decreased child mortality being only one of them, could be the cause of the ‘demographic transition’. In any case, the exact nature of the correlation is not as important for our purposes as the finding that there does in fact seem to be a relationship between fertility and factors such as child mortality, increased education, better health care and higher income, making it reasonable to assume that Hardin’s neo-Malthusian
have a strong impact on fertility in a downward direction, and that there is good reason to believe that the pattern of demographic transition seen in much of the developed world will, given the appropriate conditions, replicate itself in what is presently the developing world.

Despite its explanatory weaknesses, the Malthusian perspective seems to have had much staying power. While development economists and others in the academic community have long since been skeptical of its validity, and many development institutions have shifted their focus away from population control to poverty reduction, what some have called a Malthusian paradigm has been slower to affect popular opinion. The Malthusian outlook seems to have comported well with some Western sentiments rooted in an individualist/rationalist ideal, on which account poverty was less the result of systemic inequalities than a failure to adopt values of hard work, thrift and prudence. Seen in this light, Singer (in his original paper) and Hardin’s disproportionate focus on the issues of population control rather than poverty alleviation were, unfortunately, responses to or reflections of their time. Unger, writing more than two decades later, has had the benefit of more widespread awareness of the deficiencies of that framework, though he devotes a sub-section of the book to the issue (in which he briefly makes similar points to the ones made here), ostensibly to counter lingering myths and concerns about the relation between population growth and economic development.

The Problem with Food Aid

Having examined the thesis that aid to developing countries would eventually result in a population explosion and an overload of the carrying capacity of the earth (and having found it implausible, if not seriously flawed), I turn attention to the second possible avenue previously outlined for rejecting the idea of such aid - that of its relatively-immediate deleterious effects on the populations it is meant to serve. For our purposes here, I shall restrict the examination to the notion of food aid, the kind most often referred to by Hardin and Singer in their respective works.

assumptions about increased survival rates leading to population explosions is neither self-evidently true nor cogent.


61 Wilbur, in Callahan and Clark, p. 104.
There is no dearth of discussions in the development aid literature admitting deep-rooted concerns over the very notion of food aid. According to Oxfam-U.K., the most significant problem with food aid is that it often does not reach those who need it - 70% of all such aid goes directly to governments who then sell it to their citizens - usually those who can afford it. These regimes often do not favour increased local production of food because they rely on revenue from sales of ‘food aid’ to pad their budgets. Other criticisms have been targeted at both multilateral and non-governmental organizations (NGO) for providing too little too late - notable cases being Ghanians expelled from Nigeria in 1983 and the widely publicized famine in Ethiopia in 1984-85. An additional concern has been the use of food aid by Western nations as an instrument of foreign policy, the most notable perpetrator being the United States, especially in the excess-grain years (in the U.S.) of the early 1960’s. The use of food aid as an instrument of foreign policy has arguably forced receiving nations to subject some of their national interests to those of the U.S. Although the long-term and negative impact of this is difficult to determine, the most serious concern is that these practices, taking advantage of vulnerability, infringe on the sovereignty of states and their ability to act independently of foreign (often Western) interests. In 1983 for example, the Reagan administration enacted legislation that linked future aid allocations to a review of each country’s voting record in the United Nations. In 1973, one-half of all U.S. food aid was sent to Cambodia and Vietnam for protection of Western military interests, whilst much need elsewhere in the world - especially regions of Africa under severe food strain - remained largely unmet. Further critiques of food aid focus on their acting as direct disincentives to local production, undercutting prices that local producers need to stay in business, and allowing recipient governments off the hook by rendering it unnecessary for them to restructure food distribution channels and modify government inefficiencies in disaster relief. Food aid has

63 Ibid.
65 Lappé and Collins, p. 108.
66 Fletcher, in Lucas and Ogletree, p. 67.
67 “For example, a famine in Bangladesh in 1974 was followed in 1975 by a good local harvest. Substantial food aid imports arrived at the end of 1974 and these, in combination with the good harvest, caused a local glut... The farmer’s response to price falls is to cut back production and the cycle of glut and famine continues.” (Cathie, p. 89).
also been decried for shifting tastes away from locally grown produce towards expensive imports, making local food self-reliance even more difficult.

Whilst all of the above criticisms give us reason for pause, they do not of themselves provide sufficient reason to conclude that supplying food aid would be a morally repugnant action. The first three concerns - that the aid is not targeted to those most in need, that it arrives too late, or that it is an instrument of foreign policy - are not problems inherent to the concept of providing food aid. They plead rather for a re-examination of the way in which food aid is administered and its plans executed. It is possible to conceive of improvements in the worldwide system of response to food crises that would render these criticisms obsolete. Indeed, several strongly worded critiques of food aid programs have suggested that this is the direction in which modern food aid programs are heading, especially after global media attention paid to the Ethiopian famine of 1984-85 and subsequent changes in the way that industrialized world agencies - governmental and non-governmental - were able to respond.

The remaining critiques of food aid though address problems inherent in relief programs, including their effect on local production and their actual contribution to chronic hunger. For the defender of food aid programs, these are more problematic. It is difficult to respond to the criticisms of the inherent flaws in food aid programs without a detailed and lengthy analysis of various aid programs and their long-term effects on the regions they were designed to assist. With ample empirical and historical analysis pointing to significant liabilities in the programmes of food aid however, recent moves to reduce the share of aid assigned to this area of overseas development assistance may appear to be not unreasonable.

We should not, however, be so quick to be judgmental of relief efforts, for we are, after all, dealing with the lives of many millions of potential famine victims. We ought to be, at minimum, reasonably certain that the rejection of such a potential aid program is truly warranted. For this reason, it may be useful here to make the distinction between food

---

70 See Cathie, esp. Chap. 4.
aid provided for emergency relief purposes and food aid provided as a long-term programme\textsuperscript{71}.

Given the preceding analysis, I want to suggest that Fletcher’s condition of giving ‘only if it helps’ is not met in the case of general, non-emergency food aid, but that the opposite is true for emergency food aid. That is, until or unless it were somehow clear that the ripple effects of emergency famine relief programs were more injurious than the programs themselves, we ought, even on Fletcher’s account, to continue providing famine relief based on the principle that obvious, immediate and certain harm now, obligates us to act and supersedes the obligation to avoid causing possible harm of similar magnitude in the future, especially where the harm avoided is the possible death of millions\textsuperscript{72}. It would require a considerably convincing and clear argument to overturn the apparent moral merit in providing emergency famine relief, and such a strong and clear argument, I suggest, is not presently available\textsuperscript{73}, though this could conceivably change\textsuperscript{74}.

If this claim in support of the provision of emergency famine relief is a reasonable one, Hardin’s claims outlined above would appear to stand refuted, for: (1) There is little to suggest that the neo-Malthusian proposition is in fact true, and in fact most indicators point to the reverse prediction about the effect of ‘development’ aid on fertility, and (2) Claims regarding the inefficacy of food aid programs do not seem to be sufficiently persuasive, on balance and given our present knowledge, to reject the conclusion that the industrialized world ought to provide assistance to avert otherwise certain death in times of emergency need\textsuperscript{75}. This latter claim of course can only be valid if there is first

\textsuperscript{71} I am referring here to the sort of aid the United States provided through its program called PL 480 in the 1960’s (Smith, Chapter 3).

\textsuperscript{72} Maggie Black, in her overview of the history of Oxfam, suggests that international relief efforts in Ethiopia in 1984-85 alone kept alive 7 million people. (Black, p. 257).

\textsuperscript{73} Thomas Nagel takes a very similar line in opposition to Garret Hardin in “Poverty and Food: Why Charity is Not Enough” in Brown and Shue 1977, pp. 60-61.

\textsuperscript{74} However, it is difficult to imagine what such an argument might look like, based on the observation, for instance, that the Sub-Saharan and South Asian famines witnessed in the past three decades that have commanded relief efforts from aid organizations have not, for the most part, been followed by equally disastrous and far-reaching shortages of food in the years immediately following.

\textsuperscript{75} In a sense of course, we have not contested Hardin’s claim in its entirety because our argument in support of emergency famine relief covers just that, and not all forms of food aid. Since Hardin does not make the distinction between these two forms of food aid, we can only assume that he was referring to both, in which case only half of his argument stands refuted. Given the difficulties involved in doing so and the preponderance of evidence chronicling its historical inefficiency, the obligation to also provide non-emergency food aid is not one that I shall here defend, or, as a tangential comment, am inclined to
reason to suppose the existence of a more general and basic principle which underwrites an obligation or duty on the part of rich nations and citizens to assist those much less fortunate, such as those proposed by Unger and Singer.

It should be noted here that Singer in fact, in a postscript to *Famine, Affluence and Morality*\(^76\), suggests that it would be not unreasonable and perhaps morally obligatory for the developed nations providing aid relief to ensure that such assistance was provided in addition to and concurrently with efforts to curtail fertility in the developing world, for without the addition of the latter, the aid provided would in fact be ineffective in the long run. Here, Singer falls into the same trap that Hardin, Fletcher and Ehrlich do, in accepting at face value the predictive power of the neo-Malthusian model. His suggestion also flies in the face of evidence that family planning programs, offered in isolation, have negligible effects on fertility\(^77\): “The fundamental question is whether population policies have any role in the development process. Donors’ overemphasis on fertility may have steered us away, not toward, the solutions to real development problems... It follows that solutions need to be more encompassing than the current myopia on fertility”\(^78\).

Birth control technology disbursement has widely been most effective when carried out in conjunction with programs aimed to increase overall living conditions, including especially those aimed at increasing levels of education of women and their sense of control over their lives\(^79\). As has been amply demonstrated above, the curtail-fertility-at-all-costs thesis is not a credible one, and I shall leave aside Singer’s after-thought to this effect without further discussion and on the presumption that his error in no way diminishes the force of the argument on which the weak and strong principle are based.

\(^76\) See Aiken and La Follette 1977, pp. 33-36.

\(^77\) Lappé and Collins, p. 29.


From Food to Development Aid

Finally, to all of the above we should add a crucial proviso and reminder: hunger and famine appear to be caused largely not by natural disasters such as floods or drought, but by social ones. The underlying cause of the devastation wreaked by most famines, and indeed many natural disasters generally, can be traced back not to the lack of food or uncontrollable weather patterns, but the presence of poverty. It is lack of sufficient entitlement to food, as Amartya Sen and Jean Drèze have skillfully shown, that is the real crisis. The vulnerability and impoverished condition of communities has proven to be the decisive difference between the impact of incidents such as a toxic spill in Bhopal and a toxic-substance-wielding train derailment which occurred in Mississauga, Ontario, that same year, or between the cyclone in Bangladesh compared to one in Southern Ontario, both in 1985. Indeed, almost all well-publicized famines in the past several decades have been shown to be the result of the inability of the poor to access that food. In many instances, sufficient supplies of food were produced or present relatively close to the sites of these famines. A host of complex events has served for the most part to reinforce the inability of citizens to gain this access. Most famines and situations of widespread hunger appear to be largely avoidable.

This of course sheds an entirely different light on the apparent preoccupation with food aid over multisectoral development programmes that strengthen the ability of the most vulnerable to adequately cope with crises. The need to promote preventive strategies to avoid the occurrence of famines, however, is not in itself a justification for withholding emergency food aid, and should not be taken as such. As I have suggested, where people are already in the throes of famine and without these services they would perish, it would require a compellingly sound argument to be convincing enough to demonstrate that these should not be provided. Hardin’s conclusion (as opposed to his argument) cannot be defended on the grounds that food aid is only a short-term band-aid solution. All that might be shown by such an argument is that the question of whether and how much aid to provide for immediate needs versus long-term development programs, is one

81 Brodhead, Herbert-Coley & Lambert, p. 38.
82 Lappé and Collins, pp. 15-22.
that is problematic, or at least one that requires some deliberation, and not that no such aid should be provided at all.

Nevertheless, these findings regarding the causes of famine do raise additional concerns about the effectiveness of development aid programs in bringing about their intended results - from raising the nutritional status of populations to empowering communities to take collective action to improve their living conditions and lift themselves from depths of powerlessness. There is little doubt that those who seek (only) evidence of the failure of development programmes to achieve their goals, need not go very far to uncover reams of supporting material. The negligible or destructive impact of countless development assistance programs initiated through international institutions, bilateral relations and NGOs has been the subject of much publicity and controversy. Yet often hidden behind such reports and rarely communicated to the general public because of the its low ‘newsworthiness’ value, are the success stories, large and small, that have arisen from the world’s growing experience and understanding of effective means to address material hardship and destitution. The elimination of smallpox, micro-enterprise programmes providing small-business loans for poor women, community-based biogas plants turning cow dung into fuel, and the provision of low-cost oral rehydration solutions to stem potentially fatal diarrhea, are but a select few of the litany of triumphs of international development efforts. The disasters of development are clearly not the whole story. Only those seeking facile excuses, or who lack the motivation to seek out information regarding international development methods that have proven effective, could reasonably deny that interspersed amongst the headline horror stories are well-

---


88 For an excellent detailed discussion of Canadian aid, see Cranford Pratt (ed), Canadian International Development Assistance Policies, An Appraisal, 2nd edition, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press,
planned, participatory and efficient initiatives that continue to take bites, however small, out of global poverty:

There is, in fact, little reason for presuming that the terrible problems of hunger and starvation in the world cannot be changed by human action… (T)he eradication of famines is a fairly straightforward task, and there is not much difficulty in achieving it given systematic preparedness and the will to act quickly to protect or recreate threatened entitlement. Indeed, the successes achieved in different Asian and African countries in eliminating famines seem eminently repeatable in others. While the problem of endemic undernutrition and deprivation is harder to deal with, here too the possible lines of policy are clear enough and well illustrated by particular strategies that have already been used in one form or another… There is little room for cynical pessimism or for paralyzing skepticism.89

To recapitulate, what seems to emerge from an exploration of the lifeboat thesis and similar claims is that they rest at best on unsound premises, and that much more needs to be done to suggest how the analogy may realistically apply to the present-day world. This dismissal or at least casting of significant doubt on the soundness of the argument suggests that opposition to Unger and Singer’s claim cannot reasonably come from concerns about the inefficacy or potentially disastrous results of such intervention. It implies that directed action can limit suffering due to famine and poverty, leaving us free to explore the inordinately more vexing and intricate matter of whether we ought to.

Impartial Morality

Of the numerous objections to the claims of Unger and Singer, the one that arguably strikes deepest at the core of morality involves a metaethical concern having to do with a commitment to the consideration of the needs of all equally from a strictly impartial and hypothetical perspective. That commitment, the objection goes, is based on an implausible conception of morality, for it fails to consider that every individual has a right to pay particular attention to their own goals, projects, plans, interests and loved ones that cannot always be justified from the impersonal standpoint.

1994).

This is a significant competing claim, of great import to our effort to assess the extent of our obligations to the distant needy. For if it can be successfully shown that the requirements of a morality rooted in unwavering impartiality are not defensible, considerable force will have been drained from Unger and Singer’s thesis. For Unger, a finding that impartiality’s dictates can be superceded, above and beyond what would be required to fulfill limited obligations to dependents and loved ones, could be used to suggest that our intuitive assessment of unhelpful conduct in the case of The Vintage Sedan is itself wrong; perhaps we are not obliged to assist the bleeding trespasser or to send a cheque to Oxfam. Alternatively, such a finding could be used to expand the set of permissible actions by which we treat ourselves and close others preferentially, thereby reducing the duties we may have to distant others. For Singer, a weakness in the impartiality thesis would suggest that in assessing what is of moral significance to us and what we would be required to sacrifice in the name of preventing something very bad from happening - such as children starving to death - we may be justified in placing disproportionate weight on our own interests over those of others, thereby potentially heavily limiting the obligations that we may have to contribute to development aid.

In what follows, I draw upon a tradition of concerns regarding impartiality articulated primarily by Samuel Scheffler, Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel, and consider a number of important objections to the claims of these and other partialists.

---

90 Unger does not explicitly address the issue of impartiality, though his work throughout suggests that it would be difficult to conceive of anything other than a position of strict impartiality underlying his thesis. Singer addresses the issue briefly but directly in his postscript: “I would argue against (the) view that we are morally entitled to give greater weight to our own interests and purposes simply because they are our own. This view seems to me contrary to the idea, now widely shared by moral philosophers, that some element of impartiality or universalizability is inherent in the very notion of a moral judgment.” (Singer, in Aiken and La Follette 1977, p. 36).


92 First, ‘partialists’ and ‘impartialists’ are merely labels of convenience, and to accept them as defining strictly the boundaries of these and other philosophers’ positions would likely be to do them an injustice. Therefore, I use the terms loosely to refer to what often appear to be sympathies rather than ardent and fervent stances. Second, I do not mean to suggest here that the objections of these and other philosophers to impartiality are necessarily equivalent to each other or uniform, though certain common themes, which I have attempted to isolate, do seem to emerge from them.
If Nagel is right in saying that objectivity is the central problem of ethics, then a proper resolution (assuming there could be one), or even a full-fledged examination of a difficulty that has been tossed about at least since Glaucon’s objection to Socrates\textsuperscript{93} will clearly not be possible here. My aim rather will be to suggest how such objections to impartiality are less of a serious threat to the obligation-to-the-poor thesis than may at first appear. I proceed by providing first a brief overview of the nature of the issue and describe what appear to be some of the most salient concerns to which impartiality gives rise. I then review the perspectives of Unger and Singer in relation to these concerns, and consider several responses which may be offered in these authors’ defense. Finally, I offer some comments regarding the implications of situating the impartiality/partiality discussion more firmly within the context of a world of stark inequalities in access to material resources.

**From Subjective to Objective**

Objections to the demands of impartial morality are made primarily against consequential theories, but they may also be asserted against deontological ones\textsuperscript{94}. The claim is that the requirements of a morality based on an objective or agent-neutral viewpoint can be too harsh. These requirements do not, it is offered, sufficiently take into account the intuitively appealing belief that we are all permitted, when deciding how to live or what actions to carry out, to give extra weight to our own concerns or projects as compared to those of others. On this account, there is a limit to obligation, or to the requirements that the agent-neutral perspective of morality can demand of us.

By way of definition, agent-neutral reasons for actions here would be those that could be seen, from the impartial standpoint, to be ones which everyone would have reason to adopt. Agent-relative reasons would be those whose force comes from the agent valuing those reasons or activities herself, in a way that cannot have the same effect when seen from an objective standpoint. (As with most distinctions employed in philosophy, this one is not unproblematic, but since philosophical definitions rarely fulfill that requirement, I believe it will suffice for our purposes). This leads us to a definition of the idea of partiality, which John Cottingham has suggested is the claim that “it is (not

\textsuperscript{93} See The Republic, Book 2, for a discussion regarding why a man should act justly when this appears to make him less happy than unjust men.

\textsuperscript{94} Defending agent-neutrality, therefore, does not necessarily chain us to a defense of any specific conception of the good.
merely psychologically understandable but) morally correct to favour one’s own”\(^95\). By ‘one’s own’ Cottingham means here individuals to whom a moral agent has a special relationship or personal tie - it does not refer to some descriptive account or feature of these individuals that would make the reference universalizable. So, for instance, it would not do to favour a person who has the qualities of my so-and-so (husband, grandmother), since they are not necessarily my so-and-so. Presumably, one could also extend the definition to cover not only my relations, but also my projects, my interests, and so forth. Of course, such a position would still be universalizable to the extent that the partialist may claim that it is permissible or rational for all similarly situated parents, say, to favour their own daughters. This much anyway seems straightforward.

Further clarification is offered by Nagel, who has provided useful distinctions\(^96\) between the kinds of reasons that we may have to override the imperatives of agent-neutral morality, breaking them down into three categories: (1) reasons of autonomy which are based on attachments to our own desires, commitments, personal ties and the like; (2) reasons of deontology which arise from other people’s rights not to be mistreated or directly harmed by us; and (3) reasons of special obligation, under which umbrella one would place the special obligations one has to one’s spouse, children, work, community, nation and so on. These reasons grounded in an agent-relative perspective need not be purely out of motives of self-interest - the claims of close relations such as colleagues or members of a specific community may arise more out of contractual relations into which one has entered than their contribution to the good or happiness of the agent. An additional characteristic of these potential limits to obligation is that they are not absolute. There are limits to these limits, and reasons for promoting sub-optimal outcomes - viewed

---

\(^95\) Parentheses are Cottingham’s. Cottingham later modifies this to define partiality as the claim that “it is morally correct to favour one’s own unless one is under a direct or indirect duty to be impartial”. He means for this additional clause to cover those circumstances under which one has contracted or agreed to assume a position which requires impartiality as a condition, such as being a hiring officer for a company (in which case impartiality would presumably serve the goal of hiring the best people) or an examiner at a school. Interestingly, this seems to suggest that whenever someone has not taken an oath or committed to a position which requires impartiality, one is free to choose as partially as one wants. This omission of the principle of impartiality from the private sphere of life, where such commitments are less common, seems to me problematic, but I shall not pursue this line of reasoning here. My comments above should serve to demonstrate some of the more problematic components of the partiality thesis. (See John Cottingham, “Partiality, Favouritism and Morality”, Philosophical Quarterly, Volume 36, Issue 144, Jul 1986, pp. 358-359).

\(^96\) See Nagel 1986, p. 165. Also Nagel 1980, pp. 119-139. The two are similar but interestingly, Nagel seems to have added the reason of ‘special obligations’ later, in a revision of the Tanner lecture, and suggests that he is least sure about the moral force of this category of reasons, of the three.
from the impartial point of view - do not *necessarily* override obligations to promote the good.

The reasons most likely to be invoked in rejection of an obligation to contribute to development aid seem to be reasons of autonomy and of special obligations. If we accept Nagel's definition of a deontological restriction as one that arises out of an agent's *intention* to hurt or mistreat others, this will be unlikely to be one that can be applied to undermine Singer and Unger's thesis, since it would be difficult to argue that those who are living lives of relative affluence are doing so as a result of having made a conscious decision to render others in the world poor. There may be reason to suggest (as I shortly do) that the riches of the world's affluent may arise partly from non-intentionally harmful actions and policies towards those in developing countries, but even if so, this would be irrelevant to the particular issue at hand.\(^97\)

One additional note before proceeding with the analysis. The divide between so-called impartialists and partialists is not necessarily one over the question of whether impartiality is an ideal that should be incorporated into ethics *at all*, or whether there is *any* room in an impartial morality for special consideration of one's loved ones. Few, if any, modern philosophers argue (or likely live their lives in accordance with a rule that suggests) that particular attention demonstrated for family members and loved ones is necessarily immoral, or that detaching oneself from the particularities of one's experience is never required for gaining moral perspective. Rather, partialists appear to contest the exalted status which defenders of impartiality often accord it in moral theory, as well as the

---

\(^97\) It should be noted that on this account, deontological constraints are such that they can be invoked to keep someone from carrying out any obligation, whether they arise from an agent-relative or agent-neutral perspective. Nagel's well-worn example of the latter is where an individual, involved in a car accident on a deserted road in which other passengers are seriously hurt, finds that the occupant of the nearest house, which does not have a phone, has locked herself in the bathroom to avoid him. The person sees that there is a car in the garage which could take him to find emergency assistance to rescue his passengers, and sees also that there is a child in the house. He contemplates twisting the child's arm until the person in the bathroom tells him where the car keys are, reasoning that the harm caused to the child would not be anywhere close to the harm caused his passengers if they were not quickly attended to. In this case, the natural inclination that such an action would be morally repugnant is the basis for a deontological restraint against intentionally causing harm, even when the greater overall good would be served by doing so. On a different note, it should also be mentioned here that it may be possible to cite a deontological constraint as a reason to limit the agent-relative trump over morality's requirements in cases of providing emergency aid. For instance, Nagel suggests that providing emergency aid to someone who is in obvious need of it may be considered a deontological constraint against continuing on with one's activities and ignoring the situation.
weight it is assigned in determining our obligations to others. This is not to downplay either the gravity and relevance of the matter or the disparity between the perspectives. It does remind us however of the particular susceptibility of this issue to straw-person arguments against which we would be well advised to guard.

With a brief backdrop to the scene of limits on obligation sketched, we turn to the some claims made against impartial morality. While not intended to be comprehensive or mutually exclusive, I isolate several salient objections to the demands of impartiality into four general areas.

The first of these is a simple assertion rooted in ‘common sense’. Impartiality and strict objectivity, it is claimed, fail to take into account the obvious fact that the unwritten law of favoring loved ones is one that most of us endorse, live by, and make a central part of our lives. To expect human beings to be otherwise would be unrealistic, over and above its being undesirable. Any morality that required us to dispense of our close connections

---

98 Disagreement between the two camps is also evident over justification - that is - the theoretical underpinnings by which partial commitments, limited or extensive, are defended. Determining how the various normative theories are able to address ideals of partiality is an important project, but not one that I take up here. John Cottingham’s discussion in “The Ethics of Self-Concern” (Ethics, Volume 101, Issue 4, Jul 1991, pp. 798-817) may be instructive here. He finds that rule utilitarianism fails to provide a proper basis for partiality because it “distorts the motivational structure of self-preference and ends up justifying too little” (a concern I discuss in the following section); Kantian ethics fails to deliver the promised goods in that it provides inadequate argument for the claim that self-preference or impartiality is irrational; and a Humean outlook over-corrects for raw sentiments and self-love by imposing conventions of justice that leave no room for morally permissible self-preference. Only Aristotelean virtue ethics, he offers, with its emphasis on the mean and on balance of character, provides the requisite justification for a self-concern consistent with human flourishing.

99 Perhaps the most common of these is the lampooning of an argument forwarded by William Godwin. Godwin describes a scenario in which two people are trapped in a burning building. One of these is the Archbishop of Cambray and the other is a chambermaid, who also happens to be the mother of the individual who can save one of the two but not both. Importantly, Godwin assumes that the Archbishop has a life of greater social value and merit than the chambermaid, and is the one who should be saved. Godwin famously suggests that it is of no consequence that one of the two is one’s mother, for “what magic is there in the pronoun ‘my’ to overturn the decisions of everlasting truth?” Marcia Baron has shown that Godwin’s argument is premised on the assumptions of the greater social value of one of the two trapped in the fire, and a commitment to an unbending principle of utility - neither of which is a premise that impartialists would necessarily have to adopt. On Baron’s account, those who attack the Godwin example hoping to refute impartiality in so doing, are thereby unsuccessful. The original example is from William Godwin, Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, Raymond Preston (ed), 1st ed, (New York: Knopf, 1926), p. 42, as quoted and discussed (amongst many other places in the literature) in Marcia Baron, “Impartiality and Friendship”, Ethics, Volume 101, Issue 4, (Jul 1991), pp. 836-857, esp. 839-842.

As an example of the aforementioned (straw-person argument) concern, Lawrence Becker appears to be assuming a kind of straw-person conception of impartiality when he comments: “What makes (morality as impartiality) problematic is the evident foolishness of following the logic to its apparent conclusion - that is, to the conclusion that we must act with perfect Godwinian impartiality in every aspect of our lives and with perfect Kantian attention to universalizable principles.” (Lawrence Becker, “Impartiality and Ethical Theory”, Ethics, Volume 101, Issue 4, Jul 1991, p. 699).
to other human beings, or to abstain on acting on these inclinations whenever they favoured some individuals over others, is not one that can be taken seriously.

A second worry is that impartial morality may result in a loss of valuable outcomes, or of total value. It would be a much better world, its defenders may suggest, if people of diverse opinions, characters and values pursued their respective goals. The resulting added vibrancy and diversity in the world would be, and are, important moral considerations, for they too make life worth living by adding value. An alternate world in which everybody, in all circumstances, chose only that action which contributed to the greater good would be uninspiring and insipid. In effect, the overall state of affairs, the aggregate good, would be greater if people were allowed to engage in self-defined goals involving such things as creating a beautiful garden, painting a mural, practicing comedy - any number of activities that make the world, all things considered, a better place, or one of greater value.

Alternatively, an objection to the hypothetically detached perspective might focus on the scope of permissible action of the agent. On this view, an unmitigated impartial morality may require inordinate sacrifice in one’s way of life. That life, it might be suggested, requires a continuity of the sort that impartial morality, or rather strict adherence to it, does not allow. Sacrificing one’s life projects, in whole or part, requires individuals to set aside commitments that make life worth living. “There may come a point at which it is quite unreasonable for a man to give up, in the name of the impartial ordering of the world of moral agents, something which is a condition of his having any interest in being around in that world at all”\(^{100}\). Abandoning such ideals, the argument goes, results in a loss of integrity of the sort which ensures close cohesion between a person’s motives and desires on the one hand and her actions on the other, and keeps the possible fragmentation of an individual’s character at bay.

Perhaps some of the most commonly cited and (understandably) strenuously argued assertions in response to the ideal of impartiality fall under the umbrella of the nature of one’s personal attachments - to objects, goals or people. The problem, according to the objection, is that strict agent neutrality turns us into veritable robots that are required to abandon their commitments or devalue the objects of their passion at the drop of the

\(^{100}\text{Williams 1981, p. 14.}\)
moral hat. This requires that our attachments be shallow. One cannot truly value someone or something, the claim goes, if one is doing so in response to the demands of an impersonal morality, rather than just because one loves it or him or her. Therefore, we are not truly committed to these things as ends in themselves. We are not valuing directly but indirectly, because the valuation emerges from the calculus of the promotion-of-the-good or pursuit-of-the-right as an appropriate thing to do. This sort of relation to our valued goals and loved ones undermines the whole concept of valuing and loving.

**Impartiality in Principle**

Amongst other issues, these objections highlight most importantly a certain ambiguity regarding the ideal of impartiality, or more accurately its method of application. On one conception of impartiality, a moral agent ought to take into consideration, prior to each action, whether such behaviour grants special weight to particular objects, interests or people by notion of their relation to the agent, thereby potentially favouring some over others as a result of an unwillingness to detach oneself from the agent-relative and particular point of view. However, one could read the requirement of impartiality quite differently. Through a move similar to the one involved in shifting from act- to rule-consequentialism, it might be held that the test of impartiality should be targeted to the principles or maxims upon which one’s behaviour is premised, or to the institutions which govern human behaviour. On this latter version, in deciding whether a certain act is permissible, we step back as far as possible from the personal perspective and ask the question of whether the act could be permissible for any other similarly situated person.

This alternate interpretation of the ideal of impartiality gives one significantly greater breathing room. On the first and stricter reading, one would be required, as Cottingham has descriptively suggested, prior to painting one’s house, to consider whether there are any other homes more in need of paint, and if so, given their owners’ consent, one should proceed to paint these homes instead of one’s own\(^\text{101}\). More meaningfully, on the second version, one might plausibly justify particular attachments, favouring of, and love for, friends and family by reference to the permissibility or desirability of such preferential treatment, if adopted by all, from the impartial perspective\(^\text{102}\).

---


\(^{102}\) Marcia Baron has additionally provided an excellent overview of confusions regarding the notion of impartiality. Aside from the question of whether it applies at the level of actions or principles, she points
Presumably, it is this move (from action- to principle-based impartiality), or something like it, that permits strict impartialists to account for, and render morally permissible, preference for ‘one’s own’, without capitulating or admitting special (and difficult to rationally ground) exceptions. It might also be effective, if used, in dissipating some of the tension that exists between those who would place themselves on opposing ends of the partialist/impartialist spectrum, as it may allow for certain forms of favoritism if the principle upon which it was based could either contribute to the good or reasonably be made available to others.

In light of these alternative approaches to the ideal or application of impartiality, it is important to determine where both Singer and Unger stand in relation to them. Three observations regarding Singer’s position are relevant here: 1) Singer seems to admit of some special obligations to one’s family and dependents, though he does not explicitly detail the theoretical underpinnings of that position; 2) He seems to suggest that these special obligations are fulfilled when one’s dependents have their needs reasonably met (when “…our own children are well-fed, well-clothed, well-educated, (but) would like new bikes, a stereo set, or their own car. In these circumstances any special obligations we might have to our children have been fulfilled, and the needs of strangers make a stronger claim upon us”\(^{103}\)), and 3) While Singer is often accused of being an extreme impartialist, and - given the extraordinary weight he assigns to this principle in relation to

out that the ‘test for impartiality’ may vary. That is, from the impartial and impersonal point-of-view, any one of the following questions could presumably test for the feature one is looking to isolate: (1) Would I accept, as the justification for my present conduct, the same justification if offered by someone else in a similar situation? (one version of universalizability) (2) Can I consistently will my acting on this maxim as well as everyone else doing so? (Kantian universalizability) (3) Would I do for anyone else what I am doing for this person? (a weaker version of universalizability) or (4) Does showing preference for others, as I am now doing, maximize the good? (a consequentialist criterion). (Baron 1991).

In a similar vein, Susan Wolf lays out three distinct questions which, taken together, may be used to test one’s actions for impartiality. I paraphrase these as: (1) Am I acting in a way that any reasonable person would allow? (2) Am I holding myself to whatever standards I would expect of others? and (3) Am I appreciating and integrating into my life the fact that all persons are equally morally deserving of the fundamental conditions of well-being and respect? Wolf however believes that although this conception of impartiality is constitutive of morality, one may sometimes have non-moral reasons to choose actions that would not be endorsed from the moral or impartial point of view. (See Susan Wolf, “Morality and Partiality”, Philosophical Perspectives, Volume 6, Issue Ethics, 1992, pp. 243-258, esp. 245-246 and 254-256).

While addressing this confusion and settling the question is an important task, I shall not take it up here in any more detail and shall assume that any reference to impartiality could in fact be a reference to any one of these potentially defining criteria.

\(^{103}\) Singer 1993, p. 233.
many philosophers - this may be an accurate label, it may not be adequate if the implication of the branding is that Singer is arguing that every action ought to be assessed from the perspective of the detached and impersonal: “The element of truth in the view that we should first take care of our own, lies in the advantage of a recognized system of responsibilities. When families and local communities look after their own poorer members, ties of affection and personal relationships achieve ends that would otherwise require a large, impersonal bureaucracy”\textsuperscript{104}. Singer appears to allow the possibility of having impartiality weigh in at the level of principles, thus providing room for kinds of partiality that, adopted by all, would promote the ends of impartiality, as such.

Unger too provides no explanation of how partiality (that is, the limited form of it which he seems to endorse), or certain aspects of it, can theoretically be incorporated into the fold of impartiality, though he does provide guidance on where he thinks we ought to draw the line between the two. Unsurprisingly, the limits to partiality are triggered relatively early into the foray into agent-neutral reasons for action, leaving almost as little wiggle room for personal commitments as on Singer’s account. Unger suggests that the magnitude of one’s permissible partial treatment of loved ones does not comport well with what is commonly believed and practiced. As the affluent could prevent the early deaths of large numbers of vulnerable youngsters, they should, once they have met the basic needs of their children and provided for their education, direct their resources to the relatively easy and efficient prevention of distant suffering. While Unger does not provide a definition of the basic needs of children or minimal requirements of spouses in this context, he clearly adopts a tone similar to Singer’s. Both argue that much of what we normally consider to be part of taking care of one’s own, in material terms, involves the expenditure of resources that, considered from the impartial point of view, could and should be used to bring about incomparably greater absolute levels of improvement in the lives of the poorest. While recognizing the moral force of close relations then, their realistic impact is limited: “…for most of us well-to-do folks, no consideration flowing from strong special obligations will change the moral picture much…”\textsuperscript{105}.

Presumably, this clarification, such as it is, regarding the position of Singer and Unger on the legitimate place of agent-relative interests, assists us by allowing us to eliminate from

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{105} Unger 1996, p. 150.
the range of reasonable conceptions, the most extreme impartialist claim that there are no allowable commitments to one's own\textsuperscript{106}. However, it does not do much else for us, as their respective interpretations of impartiality have it that the lines of duty to oneself and one's own are limited to very particular kinds of claims which one's closest relations make upon one, and, apparently, do nothing to address the majority of objections to impartiality as described earlier. While the debate between partialist viewpoints and those of Unger and Singer thereby appear to be turn on the magnitude and emphasis which is assigned to impartiality and partiality rather than their legitimate presence in moral theory at all, we must still admit that the gulf between the opposing positions is significant and not easily reconcilable by any apparent means\textsuperscript{107}. I want then to turn to some of these objections and posit responses that might be offered from the impartialist standpoints of the likes of Unger and Singer to those who most ardently beg to differ.

\textit{Argument from Common Sense}

The claim that the impartiality thesis is questionable because it would require us to radically alter long-accepted human practices of treating our loved ones with attention and favour, \textit{above} what may be permissible on even the most lenient interpretations of the demands of a principle-based impartiality, involves a simple is-ought \textit{non sequitur}. The fact that most citizens of affluent societies regularly and often uncritically engage in behaviour that is implicitly premised on the validity of some version of the partiality thesis does not suggest that we \textit{ought} to engage in such behaviour. It does, however, admittedly give us reason for pause: “Common sense doesn’t have the last word in ethics or anywhere else, but it has, as J. L. Austin said about ordinary language, the first word: it should be examined before it is discarded”\textsuperscript{108}. Presumably, subjecting common sense to scrutiny is one of the principal aims of analyses such as these.

\textsuperscript{106} One could argue that the very extreme impartial position (which admits no exceptions to impartiality) is tenable, but seeing as both Unger and Singer allow room for some legitimate partial interests (even if they may be implicitly justified only by reference to their acceptability from an impartial standpoint), and given the implausibility and dearth of any modern proponents of such an outlandish thesis, I leave it aside here.

\textsuperscript{107} This finding seems to contradict or point to an exception to, John Deigh’s portrayal of the concerns of partialists as an opposition to impartiality having “more to do with difference in attitude and emphasis than with differences in philosophical belief…” which “…may not, in other words, represent any real dispute, and even if it does, the dispute may not cut very deep.” Unger and Singer’s viewpoints, at odds as they are with both ordinary morality and many philosophers writings’ on the subject, seem more akin to lacerations than superficial wounds. (See John Deigh, “Impartiality, A Closing Note”, \textit{Ethics}, Volume 101, Issue 4, Jul 1991, p. 859.)

\textsuperscript{108} Nagel 1986, p. 166.
A World of Lesser Value

Challenging the demands of impartiality on the grounds that, if taken seriously, it would lead to a world of lesser total value due to decreased diversity and intolerance for activities of aesthetic and cultural nature, is itself premised on certain assumptions which may not be widely shared. To render this objection plausible, one would have to offer reasoning to support the claim that, for instance, three dollars spent by an affluent person on an item of preference or luxury rather than a basic need would bring about greater value than would its use by UNICEF to avert the premature death of a child. Surely there exist practices in the affluent world, which involve expenditure of considerable resources whose benefit is insignificant and hardly comparable to that which it would bring about if utilized for poverty relief. I am not suggesting that the argument underlying this objection would be impossible to construct. It is, though, difficult though to envisage what such a plausible account might look like, given the inordinate income gap between the world’s prosperous and poverty-stricken and the decreasing marginal utility usually associated with expenditures beyond that required for human sustenance and basic flourishing, even liberally defined.

Undeterred, a defender of the extreme partialist perspective here may respond that it is not inconceivable for her to picture an account of morality by which leisure and other pursuits of the modern affluent are seen to have value in and of themselves, and that adding such value to the world may even - given proper and considered reflection and defense - be seen to be worth the trade-off in lives saved of distant suffering children. Again, such an argument would not, by any means, be irrational, and from some perspectives, it may even be acceptable. While it is not my intention to explore the intricacies of value theory here, a heuristic may help in shedding some doubt on its reasonableness.

109 Jan Narveson attempts to advance (rather implausibly) such a position in his "Aesthetics, Charity, Utility and Distributive Justice", The Monist, 56, 1962, which he summarizes with:

Ultimately then, it would seem we have but two alternatives. Either we literally do everything we can: which, in the case of many of us, would mean not ten dollars or two or three percent of our incomes, but probably sixty or seventy per cent. Or we make a judgment that the importance of the kind of life we have set out to live is greater than the amount of suffering preventable by depriving ourselves of the means to live it... Part of the burden of this essay has been to suggest that the latter is, after all, more nearly a real possibility than we might have thought. (p. 551).
It seems to me that what makes the value-of-leisure-activities position plausible, if at all, is that those considering it are likely to be doing so from the perspective of its potential beneficiaries. Turning the tables and posing the same question may give reason for pause. As Shelly Kagan has pointed out: “Since the money spent producing a ballet, e.g., could save a staggering number of people if spent on famine relief, promoting the good would apparently require that we do without ballet…”. Yet “how many would agree that it is better that they should starve rather than endanger ballet?”

One could respond here that viewing such a question from the perspective of famine victims begs the question, for the very process of turning tables as it were is inherent in the idea of impartiality, which is the ideal in question to begin with. This rejoinder would likely be based on a misinterpretation of the partialist position however, since few if any of those who defend a disproportionate consideration of the subjective perspective eschew or reject the notion of impartiality per se. Rather, as we discussed above, they lament its unadulterated use in moral analysis.

While this objection to the impartiality thesis could be embraced as plausible on some accounts of morality, it would seem reasonable that we shift the onus to those who would construct such an alternative account to suggest how a world analogous to ours but in which 30,000 children did not die everyday from easily preventable causes would be morally worse than its analogue in which the planet’s 500 odd billionaires, or even its richest five or ten percent, curtailed, if only marginally, their pursuit of leisure and material pleasures in order to afford the former the most minimal access to means of survival.


On a related note, it appears to me not implausible that the principle by which modest indulgence in cultural activities may assume a value roughly equivalent to human life is rendered more plausible when those considering it are habituated to a lifestyle which tacitly assumes its validity. Most of us in the industrialized world who are not preoccupied on a daily basis with making ends meet do indeed avail ourselves of frequent movie visits, restaurant outings, concerts or the like. It is certainly no normative argument, and in some cases it may even be considered to be an ad hominem attack to suggest that the potential advocates of a particular theory have vested interests in ensuring its proper justification. Nevertheless, the psychological thesis that our moral outlook is influenced by our material surroundings and extant ways of life may give reason for pause. At minimum, it provides reason to consider more carefully than we otherwise might whether a consistently comfortable material environment may predispose towards certain theoretical perspectives. As this is admittedly a highly conjectural comment, I leave it at this.

The actual cost of alleviating poverty or widespread suffering due to persistent deprivation is an important and difficult empirical question. I also return to say more about the crucial issue of individual versus collective human action to address poverty in the next chapter. It may be instructive though to point out here that the annual cost of preventing the deaths of 50 million children in the 1990s was estimated to be roughly equivalent to the amount spent on cigarette advertising in the United States in an average year, or the amount spent on the military worldwide everyday. While it is notoriously difficult
Inordinate Sacrifice & Life-plan Continuity

Those partialists unsatisfied with the aforementioned treatment of the total-value objection may turn instead to focusing on the toll that adherence to stricter interpretations of impartiality may impose on moral agents - in other words, to agent-relative reasons related to autonomy, if we follow Nagel’s taxonomy. Williams and others\textsuperscript{113} have argued that accepting only agent-neutral reasons for action may well result in loss of personal integrity - an inconsistency between one’s motives, actions and projects - and potentially force one to abandon life projects, which provide reason for living.

This contention is problematic in at least two ways. First, its underlying reasoning seems to be premised on the implicit assumption that certain adopted ways of life or life pursuits, merely by being so adopted, generate moral reasons of their own which justify their persistence or perpetuation. Yet without consideration of one’s environment and context, the adoption of such goals would appear to be vulnerable to the objection of being inappropriately self-centered. Surely one’s environment and the circumstances of one’s life should have an impact on the extent to which one pursues one’s ideal goals. It would likely render Williams’ argument more convincing if we were to live in a world of only negligible scarcity. And presumably, at some point in the future of humankind, when levels of poverty and poverty-related suffering have fallen significantly below their by-all-accounts presently unacceptable levels, our claims of legitimacy to unrestrained quests for personal fulfillment through personal projects may carry greater credence\textsuperscript{114}. But we do not yet live in that world. Though an impartiality-based restraint against the pursuit of activities which would be acceptable in an ideal world may indeed be considered a loss in comparison to what could have been, this in itself does not suggest that such pursuits are appropriate today. The repugnance with which we view the unadulterated accumulation of wealth by some elites in developing societies may be partly due to the backdrop of widespread poverty against which such events often occur. We exorciate the insensitivity of these individuals to the plight of others partly because of their


\textsuperscript{114} Shelly Kagan offers a similar argument in Kagan 1989, p. 361.
unwillingness to effect substantial reductions in poverty-related suffering which even modest sacrifices in their lifestyle and life pursuits could bring about. This is not to argue here that the world’s affluent in the North have obligations of similar magnitude to the world’s distant poor - a concern I will return to address in the following section - but that chosen life plans can reasonably be required to comport with the requirements of one’s surroundings and circumstance.

Second, an obligation to concede our treasured goals, rather than forcing us to give up on life itself, may reasonably require only that we alter some of the objects of our desire in which we had previously placed great value. A philosopher arguing about loss of meaning in his life because of the demands of impartial morality might be compared to a two-year old who loses grip on her helium balloon for whom the loss may at the time be traumatic and significant, but who will likely soon come to see that there are other pleasures in which she can find contentment. Human beings certainly find great satisfaction in the familiar and the constant, but they are not indisposed to making the best of serious losses, as many people who have suffered personal trauma will attest. But, it may be argued in retort, surely there is an important and relevant difference between the child and the philosopher (or layperson)’s loss. The child has not yet gleaned a proper conception of the real world about her, the limits of her horizon are significant, and she has not arrived at the objects of her valuation through sufficient reflection on the meaning of her life and her place within the world. True, it might be responded again, but it is not unreasonable to suppose that, from the perspective of an all-knowing detached observer, the same might be said of the philosopher.

In response, one might wish to pursue a somewhat modified line of attack involving the loss-of-integrity thesis, one with a communitarian bent. Alasdair MacIntyre\textsuperscript{115} has suggested that the problem with separating an individual from their projects and commitments must be seen from the perspective of the individual agent’s own sense of self. He makes the claim that an individual’s projects can sometimes be seen to be internal to the self - that is - a conception of the self is intricately wound up with the kinds of projects that form the backbone of his life. This happens when a person understands himself in terms of his role in a project; the self is not prior to its ends, but tied up with them. If the person’s projects are seen as being an important part of a social

nexus of institutions, traditions and customs which provide the grounding for such projects in any particular society and which enable the individual to develop a sense of self at the outset, then an impartial morality which somehow threatened these structures would be an excessive and unjustifiable threat to and burden on the individual. On this account, we seem to end up with Williams’ claim that an individual may see the meaning of his life or the reasons for his existence pulled out from under him - although MacIntyre uses alternate routing to arrive at this conclusion.

Again, this way of approaching the argument seems to dismiss the possibility that a person could change their projects in a way that would not threaten their life or grounding for living; it underestimates the capacity of human beings to make appropriate changes to their lives when necessary. I may be a complex product of the society in which I was raised, but I can surely envision myself being part of another society and its nexus of practices and institutions. Perhaps some of my characteristics would not be the same, but it is possible for me to envision an inviolable core of myself that, if forced to part with some of the attachments it previously held dear, could survive the onslaught. This is not to say that changes in life projects would not cause distress, or that they would not be difficult. It is only to suggest that we cannot justify an individual’s continuing with a certain project only because it seems to be an essential component to self. If a particular individual had decided early in life that her immediate goal would exclusively be to gain acceptance to medical school, centering her life on this project and generally completely identifying herself with this one aim throughout her college days only to be denied admission, surely she would suffer despair and perhaps damage to self-esteem. But this does not imply that there is any reason for the society to want to create extra spaces in medical school for students in that position. That would be to ignore the fact that society required only a limited numbers of physicians, or that the university could only afford to train a set number of students, perhaps without sacrificing the quality of education. In other words, an individual’s projects cannot always come to be seen as having intrinsic value of the sort that needs to be protected on the grounds that it has been so internalized. Instead, it would be reasonable for an individual to attempt, it would seem, not to place so great an emphasis on one goal, or on any project, such that a failure to achieve it or continue pursuing it would render their existence meaningless.\(^\text{116}\)

\(^{116}\)There is a further argument here in response to the subjectivity viewpoint, advanced by Brian Baxter, which I shall again mention only as an aside, and this is the suggestion that a challenge to one’s sense of self may be “exhilarating and beneficial”. A forced abandoning of projects may, if MacIntyre’s analysis
Shallow Commitments

The final source of anxiety arising from impartial morality that I want to review is the shallowness of commitments, to both projects and persons, which is allegedly imposed by rigid guidelines of such detachment from the particular.

First, it is important to dispel a misunderstanding in order to see more clearly the real root of this concern. Acceptance of the dictates of impartial morality would not require agents to dart around like pinballs from commitment to commitment, compelled at every action-decision step in whatever direction the levers of relevant consideration and impartial morality send them. If agents were required to evaluate every potential undertaking from the perspective of the universal, the objection would be a reasonable one. But impartial morality may well have it that we pursue those avenues of action premised on principles that are acceptable from the impartial standpoint and which best further the ultimate ends of morality. Few would suggest that the optimal means of achieving such ends would be to have persons constantly monitoring their surroundings, making seemingly endless ‘right’ and ‘good’ calculations and shifting their activities or ways of life appropriately and abruptly. In considering the requirements of impartial morality, it would behoove us to take into consideration the fact that the likelihood of being able to contribute to or promote the good or right would be severely diminished in a world of individuals altering direction and projects at the slightest indication from the moral calculus. Plainly there exists a legitimate need, considering human physical limitations, for relaxation, psychological space, and all the other requirements for health and vigor. Human beings are not machines who best attend to the requirements of morality by relentlessly ceding to its incessant demands. There are realistic limits to such requirements. But it should be noted, these limits on the requirements of impartial morality are strategic and practical, not moral limits; they do not arise out of the concerns of individuals rooted in agent-relativity, but from considerations about how the world is, including the limits of the human body and its requirements for staying physically and psychologically healthy and productive.

is true, give rise to a new sense of self which is equally if not more replete with purpose than the previous one. Although such changes do not come about easily, the requirements of impartial morality may offer the necessary catalyst. (See Brain Baxter, “The Self, Morality and the Nation State” in Anthony Ellis (ed), p. 123).
Second, in a similar vein, much as impartial morality may, through its principle-based variant, permit or encourage personal attachments and relationships of love and commitment, there may be reason to believe that the impersonal standpoint may require such relationships, within limits. To consider this, let us make certain non-implausible assumptions about human nature. In particular, suppose it is the case that one’s capacity and inclination to be concerned for and attend to the needs of others, and to appreciate the world as others see it, is strengthened by the extent to which one has been the subject of others’ compassion and empathy. One’s being loved, at the danger of sounding hackneyed, contributes to one’s ability to love, or at least provides the fertile ground necessary for such sentiments to thrive. On this account, if the thrust behind impartial morality lies in a commitment to take seriously the needs of all equally, and to show others due regard for their interests even when it may conflict with one’s own, then the motivations and capabilities necessary to assume the perspective of the agent-neutral may in fact be enhanced in a world whose practices and institutions foster rather than discourage deep and abiding personal attachments. Applied to the issue of global poverty, in recognizing that people’s willingness to contribute to such causes as social justice and poverty alleviation might be rooted not only in their being rationally persuaded of the reasons for doing so, but in predispositions and motivational inclinations closely tied to their life experiences, a principle which required citizens of the North to make greater contributions to poverty relief would be more likely to be successfully upheld if it existed within a context of social practices and institutions that encouraged genuine human connectedness. Given certain assumptions about human beings then, impartiality may embrace non-shallow personal commitments, though not without limits.

To this, the subjectivist - as Nagel may refer to her - may well respond that this is insufficient, or that it is precisely the kind of attachment that the partialists bemoan. We want, they might say, an account of human relationships by which their value is not contingent or derivative on some other good, but intrinsic or inherent in the very nature of the relationships themselves. An appeal to some other consideration, which would render morally permissible a decision to save the live of my drowning spouse over a drowning stranger, is “one thought too many” - the fact that she is my wife should be sufficient.\footnote{\textsuperscript{117} Williams 1981, p. 18. The example, much toyed with in moral philosophy, is originally Charles Fried’s.}
The objection gives rise to an important concern. For something more does need to be said here if we are to avoid acting on ethical precepts that are arbitrary. We want to have some means of distinguishing between morally permissible preferential reactions towards some kinds of attachments but not others: “Does it need no further justification if the person whom I save is my mistress or my second cousin rather than my wife?” If it seems counterintuitive to have to seek some justification, or some set of coherent principles or worldview which makes sense of the act of saving one’s wife, this may be the result of honing inappropriately at the ground level of decision-making by which one has to stop to ponder, prior to jumping in the water, the moral nature of one’s impending actions. But a prior commitment to a principle by which very close relations take priority, all else being equal, and one that is compatible with others acting on a similar principle, would obviate the need for pool-side moral analysis, and the resulting repugnance which may be its concomitant.

To step back from the issue for a moment, consider Cottingham’s attempt to provide a systematic and coherent justification for partial reasoning. Cottingham reasonably argues that it is inadequate to pluck from thin air principles and count them as moral:

It does not suffice, in order to make an ethical judgment, that I simply ordain some course of action for myself and others (e.g. that one should twiddle one’s thumbs five hundred times a day). Moral judgments cannot be isolated “fiats” of this kind...(It is not that) ‘twiddle your thumbs five hundred times a day’ could not under any circumstances count as a moral judgment; the point is simply that, for it so to count, there would have to be some explanation of how and why it is good (e.g. perhaps it soothes tension, or promotes a contemplative attitude which is the first step to Nirvana).

Cottingham then goes on to provide a description of how agent-relative partiality contributes to the blueprint of a good life. He suggests, in essence, that self-preferential treatment is an indispensable component of a flourishing and fulfilled life of integrity. While I shall not pursue this line of reasoning here (most all of the comments made in this section are, after all, relevant to his argument) what I want to take from it is that he has, whatever one thinks of it, attempted to provide some account by which the notion of partiality is given meaning and justification. For it is by the very appeal to its place in the good Aristotelean life that Cottingham finds support for the partiality thesis. In this, despite

118 MacIntyre 1983, p. 123.
their common rejection of stringent impartiality, Cottingham (and, incidentally, MacIntyre) seem to diverge from Williams in a way that may be illustrative.

Presumably, Cottingham’s move is not available to Williams and the similarly inclined, for whom no further justification is needed to rest partiality on firmer theoretical ground. This in itself is not irrational or unacceptable, but one of its corollaries seems problematic. If we cannot (and need not) provide an adequate explanation of the origin and moral weight of partial concerns other than the proclamation that they are mine, the project of circumscribing a limit to those partial attachments becomes significantly more difficult. At issue is not only the pragmatic concern of the extent to which one could then justifiably act preferentially towards one’s more distant relations and acquaintances by using the reasoning ‘because they are mine’. The more serious implication is that it becomes difficult to see how one would distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable partial commitments. If on one end of the potential beneficiaries of my partial commitments lie my loved ones and my cherished goals, presumably on the other end lie those of my race, my gender and so on. If the partiality thesis is going to be plausible, we will want a way to draw a moral distinction between various kinds of non-impartial treatment. But, the impartialist will rightly contend along this line of reasoning, the slippery slope from spousal attachment to racism or sexism finds it difficult to accommodate some sort of ledge upon which (any humane and reasonable) partialist will want to stand. The impartialist, by unambiguously defining boundaries around partiality as those limited preferential treatments which would be sanctioned on a fairly strict interpretation of impartiality; and the subjectivist of Cottingham’s persuasion, for whom only those partialities which contribute to human flourishing will be acceptable120; both have available to them, at least apparently, a ledge to stand on. But for those who (at least appear to) argue for the non-derivative value of partial commitments, no such apparent or obviously defensible middle ground is evident. Thus, the objection under consideration - that impartiality fails to

120 It seems to me that Cottingham’s view, though it fares better on this count in that it provides some reason for avoiding a slide into racism, sexism, and the like, does not fare too much better. The argument that such repugnant forms of preferential treatment are immoral because adopting them as principles will not lead to human flourishing and integrity, may seem inadequate. We may reasonably insist that the unacceptability of racism or sexism is due to some form of fundamental disrespect for the equal dignity of all human lives and that even if racism or sexism were found to contribute to human flourishing in certain circumstances or worlds, we may still find reason to reject them as legitimate forms of preferential treatment. This is a complex concern however, which I will not be able to adequately explore here.
adequately recognize the true nature of non-shallow moral commitments - itself leads to even more troubling sequelae.\footnote{I have assumed here that Williams is, as his discussion suggests, placing moral significance on the self-referential component here - the fact that something is \\textit{mine}. One could read him as saying instead that it is self-evident that spouses have special obligations towards each other. If this is the case, then Williams still owes us an account of why and how spouses have such obligations towards each other, whether this morally significant feature is present in common law relationships, whether it applies to two people who deeply love each other but have a platonic relationship, or people in love but not yet married, or a gay couple who cannot legally be married, and so on. It is easy to see how spouses could have such obligations towards each other, but it is difficult to see how this would not have to be embedded in a rationale and justification to which we could then appeal to answer difficult questions of this sort.}

\textbf{Context-sensitive Subjectivity}

The last substantive comment I want to make on this issue involves a question for which I will not pretend to be able to offer an adequate response, but which seems to me to be an area that requires highlighting as well as greater philosophical development. It takes the form of pointing to a potentially problematic implication of the partiality thesis when applied to the context of the world of today and its stark inequalities.

It would be reasonable to assume that those who defend a conception of partial attachments and commitments to one’s plans and friends are not advocating that they personally should be allowed to deviate from the rules of impartiality and that no one else should be permitted this privilege. Presumably, to defend the incorporation into morality of reasons for action that cannot be endorsed from the objective standpoint is to defend the use of such decision-guiding precepts for all. I think this much might be fair to say of the assertions forwarded by skeptics of the morality-as-objectivity thesis considered so far.

Marilyn Friedman has argued\footnote{Marilyn Friedman, “The Practice of Partiality”, \textit{Ethics}, Volume 101, Issue 4, Jul 1991, pp. 818-835.} that an important component of a caring relationship is not only the desire for the other to flourish, but a longing to contribute to that person’s flourishing. It matters not only that the beloved leads a fulfilling life, but also that the agent herself play a role in bringing about such a state of affairs. Individuals who play such roles in respect of each other are engaging in relationships that serve a crucial role in human fulfillment. But those who live in conditions of extreme resource scarcity, she argues, are denied this opportunity, for they are unable to access the resources necessary to care effectively for their loved ones. Those who can do little to enhance the well-being of close others, as well as these close others, are thus deprived. “It must
matter to the partialist’s theoretical stance… that the resources for favoring loved ones are distributed in a vastly unequal manner in virtually any society - and of course, worldwide”\textsuperscript{123}. On these grounds, “there ought to be a distribution of resources for caring, nurturing, and otherwise favoring loved ones which permits as many of us as possible to do so in a fulfilling and integrity-conferring manner”\textsuperscript{124}.

That argument, combined with certain reasonable assumptions about resource scarcity, may appear to lend support to the thesis that partiality itself may require the affluent to contribute to the alleviation of poverty, so as to ensure that the benefits of partial commitments are not available only to the rich. While this is a novel approach to the conundrum of impartiality and its relation to poverty, it seems to rest on a weak premise. Friedman seems to place great weight on the existence of certain material conditions in order for partial commitments and attachments to be able to contribute to the goals of human flourishing. In doing so, she may be implicitly and unjustifiably assuming that the ties that most fiercely bind human beings and so contribute to their well-being will often require for their existence certain (minimal levels of) available resources. Yet it is at least equally plausible to assume that love and caring relationships of similarly compelling depth and effect can exist in material surroundings of the most limited kind. If I live in a village of extreme food scarcity, I may choose to share with a particular person and not any others what little food I have, solely because this individual happens to be my so-and-so. It seems plausible that my willingness to consider this individual’s welfare when I myself have meagre resources, perhaps at the expense of meeting my own needs, is an even greater expression of my partial commitment to them than would be the case if we were to live in conditions of plenty. Under such circumstances, it may be the case that my caring for and nurturing this individual may lead to a depth and strength of relationship that is at least as much of a source of emotional nourishment and flourishing for both of us as if we lived in an affluent society and I were to buy this person flowers, or send them to the best daycare.

This objection to Friedman’s claim, however, is not entirely adequate. For surely there is something to be said for the assertion that human relationships cannot flourish as best as they might when individuals are not wholly preoccupied with survival or with avoiding

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., p. 829.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., p. 830.
starvation. This points to something that can be salvaged from the argument. While I cannot develop here a full and adequate modification of Friedman’s presentation, it seems to me that the intuitive pull of the claim that there may be something wrong with assuming a thesis of extreme partiality in today’s world, is grounded in the reality that a sizable portion of the world’s population is hardly in a position to pursue any life plans, projects or interests beyond ensuring their own survival. A life trapped in cycles of economic deficiency, ill health, malnutrition and limited opportunity for education does not produce the optimal conditions for exercising agent-relative claims of autonomy of the relevant kind. If the partialist is to assert the moral value of pursuing chosen life goals and interests against the demands of impartial morality, presumably she is willing, again, to assert that right for anyone. The pursuit of life plans, the absence of which may drain from life any reason for being around, may on this account lead us to seriously consider the implications of the partiality thesis for questions of international resource redistribution and justice. That would be sizeable task and one I cannot undertake here. All the same, Friedman’s challenges us to take a second look at the partiality and impartiality theses from the oft-overlooked perspective of those for whom attending the ballet and pursuing personal passions are not going to be realistic options in the foreseeable or even distant future.

In assessing where these musings on the universal and detached standpoint leave us with regard to our duties to the poorest, and in particular in relation to the assertions of Unger and Singer, it may be helpful to come full circle and recall what it is about the impartiality thesis that makes it compelling. The ideal of impartiality, difficult to pin down as it has been due to varying interpretations, involves removing oneself in some way from the particularities of one’s position so as determine whether one’s proposed actions or their underlying maxims could be adopted from the (theoretically) objective standpoint. It appears to be a natural extension of taking seriously the claim of all persons to equal respect:

If we start from a premise of moral equality as the vast majority of social theorists and moral philosophers right across the political spectrum from Robert Nozick to G.A. Cohen, we will believe that the interest of everyone matters and matters equally. There is no not believing in that, if we believe in moral equality.\(^\text{125}\)

I have been primarily concerned here with determining the reasonableness of arguments justifying a departure from this ‘default’ starting position of a moral point of view that takes seriously the interests of everyone, and equally so.

While such a brief treatment of a multifaceted metaethical debate could not reasonably be supposed to have discredited either the impartiality or partiality perspective, I have suggested that any attempt to significantly depart from this impartiality starting position in order to ward off, limit, or entirely refute the alleged stringent obligations of the affluent to the poor, is going to be faced with some sobering challenges. While one cannot doubt that the thesis that our interests should matter more to us because they are ours has considerable intuitive pull, the implications of incorporating such a perspective into our behaviour, particularly towards the world’s poor, appear to be philosophically more serious than they may at first appear.

**Obligations to the Distant**

The issue of impartiality is closely related to the third significant objection to the assertions of Unger and Singer that I wish to consider in this chapter. If an argument defending significant obligations of the affluent to the world’s materially less endowed is to be found credible, it must wrestle with and reasonably respond to the concern and potential objection that the limits of any individual’s obligations end at or are seriously curtailed by the existence of real or theoretical limits circumscribing a community, region, or state. That this is a common, if equally commonly unstated or unacknowledged viewpoint in both common-sense morality and the implicit foreign policies of some nation-states, hardly requires extensive defense or explication.

To return for a moment to the central claim of Singer and Unger, both philosophers offer responses to the objection that the distance or nationality gap between those requiring urgent assistance and those in a position to provide it, limits the obligations of the latter to the former.

Singer suggests that if the reasonable possibility exists of acting in such a way as to prevent harm coming about without at the same time causing something equivalently bad to happen, and in particular when the harm in question is absolute poverty, we are
morally obliged to so act. This is so whether the individual in need of assistance is to be found on one’s doorstep or in a distant nation. Since people’s need for food and subsistence has nothing to do with their race or nationality, to provide preference to those more closely affiliated with oneself is to violate the principle of impartiality or equality by illegitimately weighing more heavily the needs of some over others. The fact that someone geographically proximate is in need of assistance may make it more likely that we will respond to his or her entreaties, but this does not suggest that we ought to. Singer’s suggests that we are able, today, to respond to the needs of those geographically distant from us almost as well as we can to those who are not: “Expert observers and supervisors, sent out by famine relief organizations or permanently stationed in famine-prone areas, can direct our aid to a refugee in Bengal almost as effectively as we could get it to someone in our own block”\textsuperscript{126}. In regards to socially grounded obligations, Singer posits that any small degree of preference for one’s family and community that can otherwise be justified are substantially outweighed by the extent of existing discrepancies in wealth and power between the world’s have and have-nots.

By contrast, Unger’s response to the stated objection is that most of us already rightly hold that distance and location are morally irrelevant factors when it comes to providing dire assistance, though these beliefs are often clouded by psychologically distorting dispositions. Recall his use of three variant case pairs to draw the argument from analogy. In a variant of \textit{The Sedan} set in Bolivia, most respond that neither the location of the encounter between potential benefactor and beneficiary nor the nationality of the latter effect a whit the moral obligation to provide him with needed assistance. In the Haitian-bungalow variant of \textit{The Envelope}, we find that most individuals proffer no intuitively different responses to UNICEF appeals received in a resort compound adjacent to a poverty-stricken community than they do in situations where the request is received at their materially comfortable home surroundings. And in the CB Radio variant of \textit{The Sedan}, similar reactions to hypothetical pleas for assistance from an individual five miles from oneself through radio transmission in comparison with pleas so received in person, demonstrates for him that the elusive morally relevant distinction between \textit{The Sedan} and \textit{The Envelope} cannot be located in the factors of social or physical distance. To remain consistent, on his account, we would thereby be required to locate the morally relevant

\textsuperscript{126} Singer, in Aiken and La Follette 1977, p. 25.
difference elsewhere or modify our responses to be willing to act in similarly helpful (or unhelpful) ways in both The Sedan and The Envelope.

Since Unger's argument is predicated on the demonstrations rather than justification of the inconsistency in our usual responses towards such cases, it does not (if we accept his methodology) require for soundness an explication of why most of us intuitively believe there to be no differences between the original and variant case studies he constructs. Nevertheless, if we are to accept the response of either Singer or Unger to the propinquity objection and confidently revise our assessment of unhelpful behaviour towards the world's poorest (children), an examination of the nature, scope and limitations of the claims of the distant needy - in a more detailed and thorough way than offered by either author in their relevant works - is clearly in order.

To that end, I visit below three lines of the reasoning - which, for convenience, I isolate as obligations arising from Reciprocity, Affiliation and Loyalty - that often appear to lie behind claims of political, geographic or cultural limits to duties. Admittedly, Singer's suggestion that the urgent needs of distant poverty victims can be attended to almost as efficiently as those nearby smacks of the musings of the armchair philosopher unacquainted with the vicissitudes and exigencies of coordinating development assistance for the likes of the emotionally traumatized, physically ravaged denizens of war-torn regimes such as recently instanced in Bosnia, Rwanda and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, I shall suggest that the concerns of distance, as objections to Singer and Unger's thesis, are unmoving, largely as a result of being premised on erroneous and anachronistic factual premises regarding the functioning of the world's economy and interaction between its regions, or as arising from a conception of communities and loyalties that is insufficiently robust to render palatable the trumping of obligations to the distant needy in favour of attending to lesser needs at home.

Reciprocity
At the heart of many claims that our moral horizons ought not extend to distant lands is the suggestion that there is no reciprocal global agreement on which to ground such obligations. Where a system of morality exists, the argument goes, it exists because it is beneficial to all concerned. A Hobbesian state of nature becomes transformed to an orderly society because there is reason for each of its members to want it to be so. A
society of mutual reciprocity is grounded upon basic contractual rules that enable each 
member to live without excessive concern regarding conflict arising from the greedy and 
selfish nature of human beings. But the world of global relations, it is suggested, offers 
us no such scenario. There is no agreement internationally, tacit or explicit, about such 
moral or contractual standards. As a result, there can be no commensurate obligations. 
The view also finds support in the work of David Hume, who arrives at a striking 
conclusion regarding those not in a position to reciprocate:

> Were there a species of creatures intermingled with men, which, though rational, were possessed of such inferior strength, both of body and mind, that they were incapable of all resistance, and could never, upon the highest provocation, make us feel the effects of their resentment, the necessary consequence, I think, is that we should be bound by the laws of humanity to give gentle usage to these creatures, but should not, properly speaking, lie under any restraint of justice with regard to them, nor could they possess any right or property, exclusive of such arbitrary lords. Our intercourse with them could not be called society - which supposes a degree of equality - but absolute command on the one side, and servile obedience on the other.  

While Hume’s comments here are targeted to the notion of justice rather than duties 
arising from beneficence, his statements suggest that a principle of obligation of the sort 
espoused by Unger and Singer would be difficult to defend due to the inherent 
powerlessness of the world’s poor. As Brian Barry has remarked, Hume’s claim is 
even more disquieting if one considers a scenario in which a collection of beings superior 
to humans in personal characteristics and access to technology were to arrive on earth. 
Hume would supposedly have it that while humans could appeal to such a race to give us 
‘gentle usage’, they could make no complaint of mistreatment or injustice if the newly 
arrived were to declare the earth their property and proceed to exploit it for their own 
purposes. The irony of Barry’s observation is surely not lost on those inclined to believe 
that such similar disdain and moral disregard can be found in present-day attitudes of 
portions of the industrialized world towards its poorer and more vulnerable counterparts.

The reciprocity approach finds recent company in views proffered by Jan Narveson. He 
suggests that obligations to those in need of assistance can only be defended on the 


grounds of mutual aid. Arising in circumstances varying from a stranded motorist in need of a lift to the victim of a natural calamity requiring urgent assistance, Narveson’s argument of benevolence extends as far as to suggest that neighbours have a responsibility to assist others in similar situations when they are able and that such obligations may also on occasion extend to those distantly situated. His caveat is that these obligations can only be defended if there exists potential for mutuality. That premise, he clarifies, provides grounding for a general sense of civic responsibility to those with whom we live and who have the potential to make life better or worse for us, but it cannot and should not be used to justify any general sense of obligation to the world’s poor.

The reciprocity argument described above appears to be based on two significant premises. The (moral) first premise appears to be the claim that people only have obligations to those who are in a position to reciprocate and the (factual) second that most of the citizens of the developing world are not in a position to reciprocate; therefore the citizens of the developed world (as people) do not have obligations to the citizens of the developing world. An attack on such an argument could proceed by refuting the claim that poorer nations and their inhabitants cannot reciprocate. One could allude, for instance, to the threat of the South’s growing nuclear capability, or suggest that components of their cultures and ways of life rather than their material wealth may be assets of significant value and interest to the inhabitants of affluent nations. It is however the normative premise that, I want to suggest, is particularly problematic.

The assumption that the international sphere is an amoral one, or one in which moral considerations play a limited role as a result of the absence of conditions of reciprocity as here described, is implausible at best. Surely not all obligations can be based on some possibility of received benefit or harm, or on actual or hypothetical contractarian agreements involving all parties to the agreement or their representatives. All other things being equal, the reciprocity approach to obligation would appear to have difficulty grounding moral prohibitions against a wide range and type of activity, including the fortuitous torture of animals in captivity and elsewhere, willful dismissal of pleas for pain

---


130 As discussed by Andrew Belsey in “World Poverty, Justice and Equality” in Attfield and Wilkins, p. 39.
relief from the dying and infirm, abuse of human babies and harm to future persons. Applied to the international sphere the reciprocity approach appears no less unacceptable, as "...the richest nations do not seem to be related to the poorest ones in such a way that the rich nations secure a reciprocal advantage if justice is done. It very likely makes more sense for them to go on cruelly exploiting the poor nations as they have done in the past"\textsuperscript{131}.

Indeed, the reciprocity approach would appear to commit us to something like the view that obligations to others varies inversely with the disparity in power between potential beneficiaries and benefactors. While it may be possible to launch a valiant defense of a system of moral precepts that defends such a minimalist approach to obligations, it would be difficult to fathom what any such reasonable argument would look like.

A significantly more palatable alternative to the morality-as-reciprocity approach is one that has been forwarded by Kai Nielsen\textsuperscript{132}. He argues that we should not, for the aforementioned reasons, look to actual schemes of cooperation for mutual advantage to ground obligations, but rather to a broadly Kantian conception of the moral equality of all based on the understanding of human beings as ends in themselves. This of course is well worn philosophical ground, but it underscores the importance of beginning with the premise of moral equality - based on Kantian notions or otherwise - which grounds much of modern ethical inquiry across a wide spectrum of metaethical and moral theory\textsuperscript{133}. To suggest otherwise would be a difficult task, and the morality-as-reciprocity approach appears unable to provide adequate defense of the notion that it is in virtue of having the ability to reciprocate, rather than being persons (or rational and/or sentient beings), that we owe duties to others.

In light of the difficulties involved in providing a credible defense of the morality-as-reciprocity approach, one predisposed or inclined to pursue a similar line of reasoning

\textsuperscript{131} Kai Nielsen, in Attfield and Wilkins, p. 27.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., p. 27.
\textsuperscript{133} Of course, that claim in itself is only the beginning, or premise, upon which further important claims can rest: "Equality of moral worth or equality of respect for persons as persons appears to be an important element of the concept of equality. It is essential in one way or another in every important normative ethical theory. It provides a basic starting point for morality, but does not by itself tell us how we should respond to the most critical questions of resource allocation faced by our society". From Robert M. Veatch, \textit{Foundations of Justice}, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 123.
may find an alternative avenue promising. It could be argued that instead of the potential for reciprocity or interaction for mutual advantage being a prerequisite for moral obligations to exist between individuals, the relevant factor may be the existence of actual overarching full cooperative social schemes such as those, which prevail within nation states. We may accept, on this account, the principle of moral equality of human beings. But to those human beings with whom we share no socially cooperative scheme and have little or no interaction - including, for the affluent, the vast majority of the population of the developing world - we bear no obligations, and therefore no responsibility of assistance or aid.\textsuperscript{134}

This claim too has a clear normative and factual component, but irrespective of where one stands on the first, it is the latter that is most clearly objectionable and indefensible. The depiction of the world community here presented is patently inaccurate. It may have been, arguably, the case at sometime in the past, but the complex global web of relationships between individuals and states renders this view of the world thoroughly outmoded. The growing international exchange of goods and services are grounded in implicit and explicit agreements about how those relations are to be carried out. If there were no basic arrangements or understanding about trade, such transactions would not be possible. That the monetary systems of a host of nations are inextricably linked is no secret. Institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and United Nations are bodies, which approximate, albeit in minimal ways, some of the functions of national governments writ large. Foreign investment, large worldwide movements of capital, a global division of labour, ever-expanding trade agreements and the lowering of tariff barriers, especially within the past decade, are obvious characteristics of a global economic order from which it is becoming increasingly more difficult, perhaps impossible, to opt out.\textsuperscript{135} The suggestion that present-day states are self-sufficient entities and silos

\textsuperscript{134} Recall that John Rawls in a \textit{Theory of Justice} famously uses this criterion of a scheme of social cooperation - finding it largely co-terminus with the boundaries of the modern nation-state – as defining the scope of the enterprise within which his principles of justice would apply. There too of course, the view has been widely contested, perhaps most notably by Charles Beitz in the articles cited in the following footnote.

of social and economic cooperation must clearly assume the onus of providing evidence that such is the case in the modern global economic structure. As a result, any claim to non-obligation that bases itself on the isolated nation ideal needs to respond to abundant evidence to the contrary.

The claim that the modern global order can increasingly be seen to be one large cooperative scheme is further strengthened by an important additional consideration - namely, the wide-ranging impact which individuals in the modern world, and the states that represent them, are able to effect in the lives of distant strangers in untold ways. It is perhaps one of the most pernicious popular myths of our time that individual, everyday actions of the affluent have minimal effect on the lives of the world’s most vulnerable and poor. The purchase of a hamburger for whose production Brazilian rainforests were cleared to make way for grazing lands requiring locals to relocate to less arable or easily nutrient-drained soil, the purchase of shares in a European consortium making use of toxic chemicals to eventually be disposed of in a West African nation, and the Australian consumption of a Dole-grown pineapple harvested by South-East Asians at marginal pay rates, are mundane occurrences of the relevant kind. Similar decisions by bodies apparently mandated to represent the interests of their affluent constituents of course can multiply such effects manifold. “A change in ‘domestic’ U.S. farm policy, for example, can almost immediately raise the price of bread in New Delhi”136. Burdened with such empirical evidence, it is becoming progressively more difficult to suggest that individuals and collectivities - be they public bodies or those representing private and corporate interests - can choose to ignore the extensive reach of their ethically charged decisions, however ostensibly innocuous or indiscernible:

Some of the relationships in virtue of which the earth now constitutes one world are so pervasive and far-reaching that they are difficult to pinpoint or to measure...It is difficult if not impossible to measure the impact of mass communications, transportation, and other technology on world developments; their effects are incalculable. But we cannot therefore proceed as if they had none. It is more plausible to think that these factors give support to a conception of the planet as an interdependent whole in which actions and policies must be evaluated in light of their probable

impact on all those who might be significantly affected - in some cases, therefore, on all the earth’s inhabitants.\textsuperscript{137}

**Affiliation**

If the necessary condition of a relationship of mutual advantage provides insufficiently plausible grounding for a parochial view of obligations to the distant, arguments based on affiliation may sport greater promise. These can take a variety of forms. In general, each of the argument’s variants appeals to some common characteristic or feature, or cluster of these, by virtue of which individuals can be held to have greater obligations to others than may otherwise be justifiable from the standpoint of a strictly impartial morality. Recall that in the earlier discussion of the demands of impartial morality, I considered a species of this claim in the form of duties to families, dependents and loved ones. I suggested that such obligations, despite being accepted as part of the common moralities of the vast majority of human cultures, may not be of sufficient potency to override the duties to aid the distant needy at little cost to oneself.

To be sure, an almost interminable list of potential factors could be surmised as common characteristics based on which one could argue for greater obligations to assist others within such communities of commonality. These range from the trivial and obviously morally irrelevant (the community of world citizens who wear eyeglasses) to the serious (those committed to Judaism). My intention here is not to examine many of these possibilities in turn but rather to isolate a few of the most commonly cited types of affiliations which putatively shield their members from strong obligations to those outside their fold who could benefit greatly from intervention. I shall suggest that these affiliations either cannot withstand the test of moral relevance to become reasonable grounds for stronger obligations to fellow members, or that the rationales that they do support are insufficient to trump or dismiss obligations to stem premature death or mitigate poverty-related suffering in distant populations at little cost. Three of the most commonly cited of such distinctions, addressed in turn below, involve propinquity of the geographic, cultural/racial, and political variety.

Geography

Singer’s defense against the first of these objections is based on the claim that it is not particularly more difficult, given existing technology, to assist the distant needy than the geographically proximate. While Singer is no doubt correct that increasingly efficient channels of communication and means of reducing the barriers of geographic distance have mitigated the tribulations involved with providing development assistance (and would have been correct to assume that this trend would continue), his claim that such a process is almost as effortless as providing aid to someone in one’s locality is a bit of a stretch. The delicate political, geographical and economic conditions that often characterize regions of chronic poverty and particularly of famine can collude to make such processes intricate and arduous, as recent experiences of CARE and Oxfam Canada in North Korea, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda will attest. This does not imply that the majority of such efforts are unsuccessful, but it does underscore the fragile nature of development and aid work, particularly of the emergency relief variety. Long-term development projects face additional constraints that may not be familiar to philanthropists working locally, not the least of which includes cultural, linguistic, ideological, religious and social variances on a scale that test even the most philosophically tractable of overseas aid cooperants. The upshot is not that aid cannot be provided, and effectively so, but that the challenges involved cannot be assumed to be as insignificant as Singer seems to assume.

Nevertheless, the claim that our obligations to distant poverty victims are substantially diminished, on this account, turns out not to be a foundational one based on a moral prohibition against assisting those physically distant or on a moral preference for


139 Recently, Canadian NGOs as well as the Canadian International Development Agency have been found to be moving in the direction of providing support for grassroots change and development organizations based in the South, in lieu of direct foreign aid in the form of funding of programmes, in part to circumvent some of these inherent challenges in providing support for human development in lands culturally and geographically distant (see Brodhead, Herbert-Copley & Lambert, pp. 131-141):

The increasing prominence of Southern NGOs results from two separate trends. First, the role of indigenous agencies has become more important as donor NGO’s perceptions of development have evolved to emphasize participation, self-reliance, and the empowerment of the poor. These ideas, based on a concept of development as a process rather than a simple transfer of resources or skills, tends to increase the importance of locally based organizations over foreign ones...A second, more significant trend has been the upsurge in the sheer number of such organizations... (Ibid., p. 132).
assisting those nearby, but on the empirical claim that the most effective form of
development assistance is the kind that is provided to locals. If this were true\textsuperscript{140}, the most
that it could ground an objection to, against Unger’s thesis for instance, would be that
local children whose imminent premature death could be averted at equivalently modest
cost to oneself, should be attended to before distant ones. Given that the vast majority of
children in such circumstance reside in the developing world, the effective force of the
objection, if its empirical assumptions are correct, turns out to be close to naught.

There is however a second possible approach to an objection related to or rooted in
physical distance and geography. It may be claimed that the salient difference between
Singer’s drowning child and Unger’s bleeding trespasser on the one hand, and the distant
child victim of poverty on the other, is what Unger has called ‘informational directness’.
We glean information about the dire needs of each of these potential aid beneficiaries in
wholly different ways - primarily mediated by the press and aid agencies in the former,
and through a direct apprehension of the circumstances in the latter. Could the
epistemological distinction carry moral weight that Unger overlooks?

If the putative distinction refers to a skepticism about the veracity of relevant information
or the genuineness of the alleged need, the answer would seem to be - \textit{no}. Doubt about
our obligations to contribute to poverty relief is surely not a doubt about whether that
poverty exists. Nor is it likely to be skepticism about the fact that much child death in the
developing world is easily and cheaply preventable. These empirical claims are easily
verifiable\textsuperscript{141}.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{140} It should be noted tangentially that the claim that aid should be provided where it is most effective is
itself not a value-free one. Much depends on how one defines and measures effectiveness, and what
value one places on various potential outcomes. Amartya Sen, Kai Nielsen and Onora O’Neill, for
instance, may favour development assistance outcomes focused on increasing human capabilities,
promoting equality and addressing basic needs, or promoting autonomy respectively. Whether these
objectives, translated into development assistance programs, would result in actions as divergent as
their varying philosophical bases may suggest, is an open question. This and other issues of ethics in
the designing and delivery of international development programs comprise important work for the field of
development studies but of course are not the subject of this discourse.

\textsuperscript{141} Any modestly affluent individual who doubts the claim that oral rehydration therapy, for instance,
can and is used by international aid agencies as an effective means of averting what would surely
otherwise be innumerable child deaths, or that programs providing such aid are successfully supported
by contributions of affluent individuals and the governments that represent them, could easily verify this
claim themselves through research documents and development progress reports or by personal visit, if
necessary.

Perhaps the most ubiquitous (and specious) common concern regarding, or justification for, not
contributing to development agencies involves unease about the efficacy of development aid programs
and distrust of the organizations that oversee them. I have not discussed this in detail here, as the
But the objection is more likely a reference to the possibility of some sort of irreducible moral feature sprouting from the knowledge that a suffering child whose imminent death you could avert is in front of you, here and now - what Unger terms 'experiential impact'. Unger's response to this is to note that amending *The Sedan* case so that the trespasser's plight enters your experience only through Morse code transmitted over radio does nothing to effect our 'untutored' reactions to the case and *ipso facto*, is of no moral (though of considerable psychological) significance. Yet Unger's quick dismissal here appears insufficient, considering the strong weight that many individuals will place on the particular feature of direct experience. Perhaps Unger's variant case study is somehow misleading and not optimally orchestrated to demonstrate the true moral significance of the experiential impact objection.

This important question will require a fuller exploration to render it justice than would be possible here. Because of its potential appeal though, I want to detour for a moment to point to what seems to me to be a problematic implication of the thesis that experiential impact could carry with it some morally relevant feature that could distinguish scenarios such as *The Sedan* from ones like *The Envelope*.

Consider a situation in which Canadian evening television news coverage of a famine in the sub-Sahara depicts children in emaciated and vulnerable poses. That such images are inordinately effective ways of drawing immediate reactions from viewers, often outpourings of sympathy and offers of assistance or aid, is no secret to news editors or to publicity officers in the employ of disaster relief and development agencies. Images objection is largely an empirical one that, if defensible, obliges the affluent to make donations to *effective international development organizations of integrity*, to promote the establishment of (more of) them, or to advocate for extensive research into exploring means of rendering effective development assistance. As earlier discussed, the question of how one ought to direct one's international development contributions is not the question of whether one ought to make them. The only instance in which the latter question becomes moot is of course if the former yields results suggesting that there is nothing that the affluent can do to stem or mitigate suffering due to poverty - a dubious claim if not convenient canard at best.

142 It is crucial to note here that most development agencies, in Canada and elsewhere, now eschew the use of images in their communication materials, of swollen-bellied or emaciated children for the purpose of evoking sudden emotional responses (mostly guilt) from their constituents. This is not because such techniques are ineffective in the short-term, but because they are thought to do much greater harm in reinforcing negative stereotypes of the peoples of the developing world as universally helpless and in need of charity rather than as members of what are frequently vibrant communities with inherent abilities and desires to improve their own lives if exposed to the enabling economic and social factors providing them the opportunity to do so.
such as these have proven to be consistently more effective than similarly vivid
descriptive accounts of such famine victims in newspaper articles, despite the fact that
they present, it would seem, comparable information through different media. And
presumably, the television images would in turn be less successful at eliciting aid than
would having the emaciated children showing up at one’s doorstep requesting food.

Let us assume the validity of the thesis that the directness of one’s experience of an
urgent situation can generate a genuine moral obligation on the part of those who can
offer assistance in a way that indirect experience (through television, newspaper,
mediated by information from aid agencies or otherwise) does not. If such a morally
distinct feature is cited as being able to explain the obligation that many feel when
encountering such situations, it would also have to account somehow for the fact that
television images seem to have similar, albeit less intense, effects, and that newspaper
article accounts presenting similar information, though also effective, even less so.
Presumably then, the moral obligation to aid generated by being informed of someone in
crisis varies proportionately with a feature akin to the vividness of the account or the
directness of the relation between the potential beneficiary and benefactor.

On this account, it would appear that at least one of the factors that would need to be
considered in determining the extent of one’s moral obligations to aid individuals at risk of
premature death or serious loss, on any given day, would be the extent of that
individual’s exposure to vivid television accounts of such suffering victims on that day or
other unit of time. A defender of such a thesis, in order to render plausible the claim,
would presumably be required to propose a calculus, or sketch of one, for determining
the weight of moral obligation to assist the needy - one that took account of the variable
experiential directness of exposure to sorts of situation in which one’s assistance could
avert untimely death or serious loss. In order to properly account for the differential
obligations generated by experiences of incrementally lesser directness (e.g. crisis
victims appearing on one’s doorstep; hearing about a crisis victim around the corner via
one’s CB radio; seeing a report of the victim on TV newscasts; reading about the crisis
victim in a relief organization’s newsletter) the calculus would be required to differentially
weigh each of such experiences in order to arrive at a conclusion regarding the true
extent of our moral obligations.
That calculus would also presumably be required to somehow take account of another contingency. An individual who intentionally or unintentionally avoided, wherever possible, exposure to moral-obligation-generating television news reports, particularly of the vivid kind, could adroitly evade duties to sacrifice for the sake of others to which they might otherwise have been subject. The claim that the extent of one's direct experience of a crisis victim is a morally relevant one would thus also imply that the extent of one's moral obligations could be heavily reliant on choices made by news editors. Victims of famines that were relatively well covered by the international media (such as in Ethiopia in 1984-85) could then legitimately argue that their salient needs for aid ought to take moral priority over those victims of famines which, though comparably severe, were all but absent from international media reports (such as in North Korea in 1996-97). Yet the decisions made by media outlets concerning which major international stories to cover are often made on the basis of reasons that have less to do with moral praiseworthiness, blameworthiness or overall consequence than with practical limitations, financial costs and news editors’ understandings of the public taste. Presumably, one could somehow incorporate into the calculus some factor to account for motivation - those who intentionally evaded direct experiences of crises in order to escape obligations would be looked upon less favourably by the calculus than those who did so without nefarious intent.

These would appear to be some of the implications of accepting a theory of obligations based primarily on the notion of experiential impact. That we could construct a calculus that incorporated such vicissitudes in a reasonable way seems highly implausible. We would want, I suggest, a theory of obligations and duties to the needy to be less subject to such contingencies as the whim of news editors more concerned with making money than reporting famines. The experiential impact thesis may be plausible as a psychologically explanatory comment on the kinds of things that best garner our attention and our sympathies, but this does not suggest that it can thereby be relied upon as

---

143 This observation was confirmed during personal communication with Joe Schlesinger, correspondent for CBC News, Toronto. See also Melanie Gruer, “Southern Images, Northern Voices” in Beamish and Sanger, p. 89 and Eleanor O’Donnell, “Mass Media Worldviews” in Swift & Tomlinson, from which the following is taken:

A magazine with Wayne Gretzky on its cover is easier to sell than one featuring a story on Canada’s economy or the world debt, the militarization of the world economy, rural and urban crises around the world, working conditions in “special economic zones” or the international exchange of expertise on torture techniques. Demographics and marketing - not some higher principle of journalistic merit - determine what you see on the newsstand. (p. 285)
having *moral* weight. Things are not, as they say, always as they seem, and it is partly the job of philosophical analysis to be particularly sensitive to situations in which this might be the case. While these concerns by no means vitiate the experiential impact claim, they do intimate that the argument may not be as sound as its intuitive appeal may suggest.

*Race and Culture*

The assertion that we should provide assistance only to those, or with a preference for, those culturally or racially affiliated with ourselves, on the basis of these cultural and racial affiliations as morally relevant, is even less persuasive. While I will not address these arguments in detail here, it may suffice to call attention to the absence from the recent philosophical literature of any serious argument (to my knowledge) challenging the assumption of the moral equality of humans (however defined) on the basis of race or culture and advocating its potential as a morally relevant distinguishing feature amongst persons\(^{144}\). The hazards of adopting such an approach are, I shall assume, unambiguous. On the international scene, one could well imagine Bill Clinton pleading for lenience from the global community for failing to take action, within American power, to avert mass genocide in Rwanda during his regime on the basis that their moral obligations to mitigate suffering were tempered by the afflicted peoples being primarily black, or Margaret Thatcher using similar reasoning to suggest that Britain’s moral commitment to bringing about an end to apartheid was attenuated by the closer cultural affiliation of the British with Afrikaners. That such claims would be easier to justify if we granted the validity of the racial/cultural objection seems clear. But the idea that such an objection would be acceptable on any reasonably conceivable account of morality, is not, I shall presume, a position of sufficient apparent merit to warrant here extensive consideration\(^{145}\).

\(^{144}\) This is not to suggest that discrimination based on race has played no role in the producing or perpetuating a state of affairs in which the majority of those of European and Anglo-Saxon descent versus those of Asian and African origin, fall, as a general rule, on different sides of the North-South divide. It may be a descriptive rather than normative question of some interest to determine the accuracy of explanations such as: “There has always been racism. But it developed as a leading principle of thought and perception in the context of colonialism. That’s understandable. When you have your boot on someone’s neck, you have to justify it. The justification has to be their depravity.” (Noam Chomsky, *The Prosperous Few and the Restless Many*, (Berkeley: Odonian Press, 1994), p. 64).

\(^{145}\) A more detailed analysis of why and when discrimination based on race is unacceptable is provided by Peter Singer in “Is Racial Discrimination Arbitrary?” in Jan Narveson (ed), *Moral Issues*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 308-324. Singer finds racial discrimination to be unacceptable (when it is unacceptable) based not strictly on the moral arbitrariness of race as a factor used to differentiate, but on the failure to respect the principle of “equal consideration of interests”. The application of this
**Political Association**

Political association through common citizenship in a nation state may hold greater potential to ground an objection to providing aid to distant others based on affiliation. It may be asserted that the nation state provides legitimate boundaries and limits to otherwise potentially interminable obligations. This raises the question of whether it is in virtue of being a compatriot that one finds oneself with any or greater obligations to others, or whether the source of the obligation is some factor likely to accompany the fact of being a compatriot in virtue of which one bears such responsibilities. If the latter, the claim of priority of obligations through common citizenship would turn out to be a contingent rather than necessary one, more appropriately broken down and described according to some feature of the kind examined earlier such as affiliation through cultural similarity or a shared system of social cooperation.

If the claim is rather that one owes greater responsibility to assist fellow citizens *qua* fellow citizens, one must ask why that is the case. What it is it that justifies, from the moral point of view, the attachment of particular and special obligations towards fellow citizens solely on this basis? “Should I make greater efforts to reduce malnutrition in Kerala than Kentucky merely because Kentucky is in the American political system and Kerala is in the Indian?”

To find moral significance strictly in the fact of common citizenship or nationality alone would appear to be a difficult task and one yet to be well articulated as a moral claim:

> If two people are starving, why should it matter, to the point of my being bound to aid the one and not the other, that the one and not the other is my compatriot? Why should I not instead allot my aid, for example, in accord with a duty to aid those deprived of subsistence, disregarding nationality entirely or giving nationality only “tie-breaking” weight? I know of no one who has adequately answered - or even straightforwardly and systematically tackled - these questions in defense of the thesis that compatriots take priority...\(^{147}\)

---

\(^{146}\) Shue 1980, p. 136.

\(^{147}\) Shue 1980, p. 139.
It appears more likely that the allegation that one owes greater duties to one’s compatriots is not based on the morally distinct and relevant nature of common nationality or citizenship per se, but rather on some feature associated with common nationality from which it derives its significance. I turn now to examine the most commonly cited of such potentially irreducible moral features - the notion of loyalty or, applied to the case of the nation-state, patriotism.

Loyalty

Our discussion to this point of various kinds of affiliations with others has attempted, unsuccessfully, to isolate particular characteristics with moral significance in virtue of which we might be able to limit the stringent obligations heaped on the prosperous by Unger and Singer. But perhaps it is the case that this exploration has been narrow in its vision by somehow presuming a certain perspective or some particular criteria for moral significance rooted in a liberal tradition, with its accompanying baggage regarding the nature of human beings and their relations with one another. I want then to pause for a moment to consider whether a limitation on our obligations to such distant others could potentially be rooted in a communitarian approach to the social and political relations that ought to prevail between modern individuals, and of the possibility of loyalty (to communities) as a separate moral principle or criterion that is irreducible to any of the features of affiliation considered so far. Although I shall not be suggesting that such an objection would be raised by most or all who might call themselves communitarians, I shall briefly consider whether that perspective, if adopted, could serve as the basis upon which to predicate a revision of our assessment of the relevance of economic and social distance as it relates to assisting the world’s most economically deprived. While a proper understanding of such an objection would entail a significantly more thorough background to and exegesis of the communitarian objection to the liberal conception of morality and moral agents than is here possible, the following - a schematic-by-dialectic detour considering the objection from communitarianism - should suffice to shed doubt on the viability of this defense against the demands of morality as laid out by Unger and Singer.

The objection I refer to may take something similar to the following form. The members of one’s community have a sense of “shared traditions”, common values and prevalent traditions. This similarity is an important ingredient in the existence and in the viability of a community. And a community is one that shares certain aims. Its members adopt a tacit
agreement to assist each other in meeting their needs and in working towards a common good. There is a certain sense of exclusivity in a community, by definition, and this is vital. Without it, the bonds that form an essential part of human relationship within that community are sacrificed. Implicit in the accompanying communitarian ethic is the suggestion that one has substantially fewer obligations to those outside one's community. If such were not the case, the notion of community would be endangered. Since communities do not (or very rarely) stretch beyond the boundaries of nations, we have no obligations, or very limited ones, towards people beyond our borders. Michael Walzer implies that these limits are well defined:

Politics... depends upon shared history, communal sentiment, accepted conventions - upon some extended version of Aristotle’s “friendship”. All this is problematic enough in a modern state; it is hardly conceivable on a global scale. Communal life and liberty requires the existence of relatively self-enclosed arenas of political development. Break into the enclosures and you destroy the communities. And that destruction is a loss to the individual members (unless it rescues them from massacre, enslavement, or expulsion), a loss of something valuable, which clearly they value, and to which they have a right, namely their participation in the “development” that goes on and can go on within the enclosure.148

There is no doubt much to be said for this conception of how human beings should order or structure their lives, in a modern world that fragments individuals by disallowing opportunities for connectedness. That a community of the sort espoused by Walzer may be a partial solution to some of the social woes of modern life is certainly a plausible claim, but the question to which this gives rise is why such benefits could not also be consistent with viewing events and circumstances taking place beyond its borders as being important and possibly morally onerous.

The response seems to take the form of a defense of the notion of loyalty, and, applied to the nation-state, of nationalism. Andrew Oldenquist makes the claim that loyalties form a separate category of moral motivation: “In terms of the logic of the reasons they provide,

148 Michael Walzer, "The Moral Standing of States: A Response to Four Critics" in Beitz, Cohen, Scanlon and Simmons (eds), p. 236. It should be noted here that despite the strong inward-looking bias, Walzer admits that “good Samaritanism” can extend across political frontiers but seems to deny that assisting others in the way we are interested can be a duty. Walzer offers some explanation of his reasoning by way of saying that one ought to help another (non-community member) in urgent need when such a person is “discovered” in their path, and where the risks of giving are relatively low. The example seems to be restricted to face-to-face encounters however, and it is doubtful that Walzer would extend the notion sufficiently to embrace anything approaching an Ungerian or Singerian obligation to contribute to development aid, given the tone of his work. (See Michael Walzer, “The Distribution of Membership” in Brown and Shue 1981, p. 3).
loyalties are a third category of the normative, distinct from both self-interest and impersonal morality. The foundation of the argument bears strong resemblance to a communitarian definition of moral community - one in which individuals share 'non-instrumental goods'. Members of a community place the needs of that community above others by virtue only of that community being theirs. Apparently this does not preclude the possibility of being loyal to a specific community because of some characteristic of it - in fact, communities need to have some distinctive feature or features that differentiate them from other communities of similar external structure (a nation, family, region). But these distinctive features are importantly not to be seen as the basis for individual preference, which is rooted in an unwavering and tacit covenant to weigh the needs of community members above that warranted from the perspective of impartiality. Loyalty cannot, on these grounds, be reduced to other moral reasons - either egoism or impersonal duties. Without such loyalty, it is argued, communities wither, hooliganism becomes more prevalent, crime rates soar, and urban alienation sets in. Such an argument then, would object to strong obligations to those outside of one’s community and nation in favour of concern for those within those boundaries.

This perspective has some intuitive appeal. A sense of pride and commitment to one’s community, whether it be a neighbourhood, city, cultural group, or nation, is generally seen to be of positive value. The claim from the perspective of loyalty, that we need some such ties in order for individuals to maintain in proper state their surroundings, create livable and comfortable communities, and generally contribute to the betterment of their living environments, is difficult to deny. But the question still remains - on what is this loyalty based? The response that loyalty is not reducible to any other form of moral reasons seems insufficient without an accompanying rationale. It smacks of arbitrariness in the choice of motivations for actions subsequently and artificially labeled moral. Surely the criterion for being a moral reason for action needs to be more stringent than this.

Perhaps one of the most central questions to answer then for any defender of loyalty would be - on what grounds can loyalty require agents to favor the needs of a community above those of anyone else? Surely on any plausible account of morality, individuals are to be treated equally unless there are morally relevant differences between them that justify acting otherwise. Why should we not view the fact that two

individuals share membership in a community to be any more of a relevant moral
difference than race, on which grounds we would abhor discriminatory treatment? The
response to this seems to be that “racism is negative, being much more concerned with
hatred of other races than with pride in one’s own, whereas loyalty is positive and is
primarily characterized by esteem and concern for the common good of one’s group.”

Yet the prevailing powers of Nazi Germany and pre-1990 South Africa justified many of
their objectionable policies and actions primarily on grounds of love or unadulterated
commitment to the Aryan or priority of the white race. The result was the systematic
annihilation and/or subjugation of a group of human beings due to their non-membership in
a particular community. The benefits of community are great, but the hazards of
unrestrained loyalty ought to make us weary of the potential, albeit sometimes
unintentional, results. This concern does not equate racism with denying assistance to
those suffering due to distant poverty, but it does warn of a slippery slope from group or
national preference to blurred or bridled moral vision giving rise to the concomitant
rejection of, or unjustifiable self-exemption from, the idea of moral equality.

One possible rejoinder at this point might be for a loyalist to take up a line of reasoning
very similar to the kind we have previously encountered in agent-relative reasons to
override impartial morality. This would involve a reference to the particularities of an
individual’s circumstance, of devotion to it because it is his or hers. Could the loyalist
analogously argue that a commitment to one’s nation or general community, as opposed
only to specific individuals, has a special, reason-giving force that can override other
obligations?

This would seem to be a promising strategy for any loyalist to adopt, but a closer look
reveals its inadequacy. If the loyalist is making the claim that a nation ought to receive the
special commitment of its citizens because it contributes to the creation of greater bonds
between members and improves the general well-being - physical, emotional or
psychological - of that nation, this might be a consequential argument in favour of what is
being here called ‘loyalty’. In other words, loyalty could in fact be reduced, in this
instance, to the requirements of morality, which, in taking into account the greater good
brought about by favorable treatment, might look on devotion to one’s community, with

---

150 Ibid., p. 177.
certain and extensive limits, as justifiable from an impartial point of view. But there is nothing to suggest that a genuine concern for one’s community ought to be regarded as a separate moral virtue, principle or ideal, or that it is incompatible with more extensive concern for the people beyond the limits of one’s nation. And on occasions when the two conflict, which they often will, the weight of the benefits of being partial to one’s nation may be compared to the nature of the alternative. In the case of the contributing to premature, distant child death, it would take a compelling and forceful argument indeed to suggest how concern for those within one’s own nation would trump the greater good of contributing to poverty alleviation overseas. Even an argument that attempted to demonstrate that poverty existed within one’s own nation, where that nation was part of the industrialized world, would have to contend with the reality that the worldwide average income level below which a person would be considered to have insufficient needs for daily life is $370 per person per year\textsuperscript{151}. A contribution of that nature towards the poor in an African state would likely go substantially farther than the equivalent amount in the industrialized world.

But, the loyalist might argue, this is precisely what loyalty is not - it is not reducible to a cost-benefit analysis of promoting the good, all things considered. As stated earlier, loyalty needs no additional moral backing. It arises when a person gives favourable treatment to a community or nation as a result of its being hers. Unfortunately, this definition wades into territory that is ever more hazardous. For can an allegiance to one’s state independent of the nature or policies of that state, and therefore to the citizens that it represents, be reasonable grounds for partiality? If the United States invades Grenada, are its citizens obliged, on pain of infidelity, to support the effort despite the fact that it may be an unjust invasion? Surely the unmitigated fervor of patriotism, when not subjected to the dictates of reason and an impartial morality, can be ruinous. To pledge allegiance to a nation or a nation’s citizens irrespective of its nature, that is, an allegiance that is necessary and not contingent on the nation or citizen’s being a certain kind of place or people, often leads to devout moral absolutism and rampant destruction.

“Because patriotism has to be a loyalty that is in some respects unconditional, so in just

\textsuperscript{151}World Bank 1993, p. 27.
those respects rational criticism is ruled out. But if so the adherents of the morality of patriotism have condemned themselves to a fundamentally irrational attitude...

Again, a loyalist might take exception to this. For love of one’s family is not only based on particular qualities of the beloved’s character. One loves one’s child or parent, many would argue, because they are your child or parent, not for their instrumental value or because they are a certain kind of children or parent. The same may apply for a general community or nation. In this case, one has reason to be impartial towards those in one’s nation because of this irreducible relation.

This, despite its other failings, is the potentially valid crux of the loyalist argument, and it is certainly not without its intuitive plausibility. The issue takes us back to Bernard Williams’ concern that an impartial-morality account is not adequate to ground meaningful human relationships - flipping a coin to decide whether to save one’s spouse or a stranger is repugnant. But, we should recall, our previous discussion suggested that it is possible, perhaps even necessary, to find room for needed genuine human connectedness in a morality that took account of the needs of all from an impartial perspective. An analogous claim may be made of one’s involvement in a community or nation. Indeed, it would be plausible for members of a community or region to be concerned particularly about their geographic or cultural groups in so far as doing so would be an efficient and effective means of maintaining healthy local social institutions and relationships. It does not make much sense for a Muscovite to be more concerned about the incidence of youth crime in Montreal, if her own community is facing a similar problem and the amount of time and resources at her disposal to address the problem was finite. While the loyalist would no doubt shun such a reinterpretation of the fundamental moral basis of her claim, I am suggesting that certain portions of the ideals to which the loyalist appeals for defense of her viewpoint might, in a more nuanced and detailed account, be adequately incorporated into the fold of impartial morality. Other loyalist ideals, such as a commitment to embrace - without challenge or subjection to the test of human equality or impartiality - the values or positions of a stated community, as Alasdair MacIntyre has argued, seem to arise from

---

152 Alasdair MacIntyre, “Is Patriotism a Virtue?”, The Lindley Lecture, March 26, 1984, (Kansas: Department of Philosophy, University of Kansas, 1984), p. 13. This quote, taken out of context, may imply that MacIntyre’s purpose is to attack the loyalist hypothesis described here, which would be inaccurate. The widely acclaimed paper is designed to clarify arguments on both sides of the impartial morality/patriotism divide, rather than to (expressly) defend one of them.

153 Ibid., esp. p. 18.
a particular conception of morality irreconcilable with the liberal notion of using criteria for moral evaluation which are abstracted and stripped of particularities in order to arrive at universalizable conclusions.

With that cursory overview in hand, we return to the central question: how effective is the communitarian/loyalist objection against the thesis that the affluent owe debts of duty to mitigate distant poverty-related suffering? The answer, oddly enough, is not clear. The claim of the moral significance of loyalty to community is difficult to evaluate in the absence of an overarching and universal conception of what a reasonable moral reason for action, or set of them, ought to look like (adopting the liberal one, of course, begs the question). But let us grant the communitarian, for the moment, their irreducible, morally significant claims of loyalty. Would allegiance to one’s community or nation in the developed world always, sometimes, or ever override obligations to assist some of the vast numbers of non-compatriots living in conditions of severe deprivation largely unseen - due to the existence of minimal welfare schemes - in the communities of the developed world? The loyalty/communitarian framework seems unable, at least as here stated or articulated to date, to address this. What is missing that might make this a plausible objection to the claim of Singer and Unger would be a thorough account of how the urgent needs of those external to the community are to be weighed against internal allegiances when the two conflict and when their respective justifications are rooted in incommensurate conceptions of morality. Given the nature of the required reconciliation, this will be no facile task. Yet without such an account, a rejection of the claims of the distant poor à la Unger and Singer, seems, I want to suggest, premature and inadequately buttressed.

While not an argument I wish to here defend, it seems to me possible that there is an alternate route that keeps the impasse between the two clashing conceptions of morality and obligations here examined in abeyance. One way of framing the dichotomy to mitigate its effects is to assume a concern for the needs of building community, but to do so in a way that expands one’s definition of community to include others not previously members. That is, a suggestion that seems to me not unreasonable is that we should aim for a global community of sorts, with some of the characteristics of the kind professed by communitarians. No doubt this would not be entirely satisfactory to those intent on maintaining the limits of community close to home, or who believe this would defeat the purpose of declaring community, but the benefits of such an outlook could be promising. A global community then, would be one that encompassed the range of humanity in a way that included all people within the realm of morality’s reach. Global poverty, on this account, would not be seen as something foreign and beyond limits, but a disturbing fact about the way in which over one billion members of this club - the global community - eke out an existence. This suggestion of course is rife with complications and short on specifics but my gesturing in that direction may point to a means by which the two conceptions, while obviously remaining distinct, may find more areas of ‘overlapping consensus’ than are at present evident.
Provincialism as Anachronism

If the above dismissal of affiliation, reciprocity and loyalty as grounds for rejecting the thesis of Unger and Singer is vaguely unsettling despite the weight of the arguments presented to undermine them, perhaps this is the result of lingering intuitive concerns rooted in common morality but unjustifiable from the moral point of view. Unger of course, makes precisely this claim about the central component of his argument, and has provided, as earlier discussed, some interesting psychological conjecture about why this might be the case.

Pausing from the rigours of analysis for a moment, it may be worthwhile to call attention to a potentially explanatory psychological thesis of the same sort in regards to the claim that affiliations of the kind advanced above are insufficient to ground a limit to our obligations to avert suffering from global poverty-related causes. Judith Lichtenberg posits that the seemingly natural inclination towards allegiance to those of one’s own community or tribe is a psychological relic from an age in which it served its people well\textsuperscript{155}. It was premised on what was then a largely accurate map and account of human relations. Given advances in the human capacity to manipulate the environment, particularly in the areas of technology and population growth, that premise is no longer empirically correct. Communities that once defined the limits of an individual’s world, formerly largely self-sufficient, have seen their borders gradually become increasing permeable and incrementally less significant. Notably:

\begin{quote}
…the development from many worlds to one world has resulted from epistemological factors as well as ontological ones. It results not only from engaging in new kinds of activities whose effects extend the boundaries of the world, but also from an increased understanding of how events affect a world, or even just \textit{that} they do\textsuperscript{156}.
\end{quote}

Interestingly, that description of the source of our strong intuitive identification with those in our fold is consistent with Unger’s thesis regarding the illusionary nature of our human psychological tendency to distort our true moral commitments to those normally considered external to the fold. Rather than undermine their claim then, the above musings on our obligations to the distant may lend additional explanatory power and

\textsuperscript{155} Lichtenberg, in Brown and Shue 1981, pp. 86-94.

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., p. 89.
credence to some of the premises upon which Singer’s and Unger’s otherwise putatively outlandish assertions are based.
Chapter II: From Symptoms to Causes

A full-page ad (with accompanying picture of a smiling Peruvian) jointly published by the Globe and Mail and CARE Canada stated that “the free enterprise system is alive and well in the Third World… We want your tools, not your money.” What comforting news. Business leaders and professionals alike can do their part by supporting the newspaper and charity, and everyone’s personal priorities, political views and spending can remain in tact…Given this optimistic perspective, solutions are simple too: practical, small-scale, and best of all, quite feasible within the free enterprise system. Never mind that the free enterprise system of international banking and high finance created Peru’s $15.4 billion debt in the first place.

Eleanor O’Donnell 157

Our discussion to this point has been focused on a few common positions staked out against the assertions of Unger and Singer. I have suggested that for these objections to be convincing, they require a more careful and adequate defense than has to date been offered and their widespread popular espousal would suggest. While these concerns by no means exhaust the range of potential objections that could be cited in taking exception to the authors’ intuitively unpalatable arguments, our review of them does appear to suggest that several of the most prima facie plausible objections to Unger and Singer strike at the heart of a number of issues in applied and meta-ethics so central and historically problematic that their validity ought to be neither dismissed nor accepted as readily as Singer and Unger or most of their critics - in their relatively brief treatment of them - have respectively assumed. Determining our obligations to the poorest is fraught with complexity and challenge all too often glossed over in both popular and philosophical dialogue.

I want at this juncture to shift gears in this investigation to consider the implications of a consideration and potential objection left largely unaddressed by Unger and Singer, and equally inexplicably generally disregarded by those formally responding or objecting to their thesis. My review will suggest that the virtually exclusive focus - in the relevant works of Unger and Singer and in the philosophical literature responding to them158 - on

---


158 Singer does make reference to, and briefly dismisses a potential objection rooted in, a Nozickean entitlement theory in Reconsidering the Famine Relief Argument (see Brown and Shue 1977, pp. 41-42). Singer suggests, but does not detail his claim, that the entitlement approach seems to be rooted in an
obligations to address global poverty arising from what has variously been termed duties of benevolence, beneficence or rescue, is unjustifiable and renders deficient, in its absence, in at least one crucial respect, any proper evaluation of the authors’ claim. What such discussions have failed to properly and adequately consider is the moral implications of the context in which that poverty takes place. To wit, glossed over in much of the literature regarding rescue and ‘aid to the distant suffering’ are the structural and systemic causes of deprivation and the arguable perpetuation by the affluent of widely accepted and ingrained patterns of behaviour that restrict the potential of the poor to escape severe economic and social marginalization.

As earlier intimated, depending on one’s definitions of the terms, that discussion could shift the focus and nature of our inquiry from an analysis of potential duties of beneficence to a gesturing at how the requirements of justice, were they to be appropriately considered, would likely impact our assessment of the claims of Unger and Singer. It may be that the reluctance of the relevant literature to view these authors’ claims from the latter perspective is unconsciously (and unconscionably) due to a skepticism regarding what might usefully be discovered in the process. Exposing the innards of the structures that mediate between the world’s poor and the wealthy is a task of stunning complexity. Empirical observations about such a subject matter are notoriously vulnerable to variable accounts of fact and interpretation, ideological distortions and the daily fluctuation of events. Yet not addressing the issue of systemic issues in the perpetuation of poverty seems to me to be an ideological commitment (towards maintaining the status quo) of a worse kind than a sincere attempt to determine

overly individualistic conception of human rights; based on an unrealistic requirement that we must determine whether present ownership of natural resources are just by examining how they were historically acquired; and results in patterns of distribution of wealth and resources that would be unlikely to be accepted from the perspective of an impartial observer. My argument in what follows appears to be consistent with Singer’s second aforementioned (and abbreviated) line of attack against Nozick, though I shall not take up Singer’s other two (rather thin) rebuttals here.

The closest Unger seems to come to addressing structural inequities is a passing reference to the obligation to engage in “political activity” to end poverty-related suffering in Living High and Letting Die (p. 152).

the role of the world’s economic machinery in tolerating the incontrovertible stunning inequalities and skewed power relations that have been one of its hallmarks.

Short of a treatise then on the global economy, I sketch below in necessarily broad strokes, some relevant features of the world’s institutions, structures and processes whose tacit absence from the horizon of relevant empirical considerations in Singer and Unger’s analysis, I will suggest, renders these authors’ normative conclusions insufficiently responsive to real-world exigencies. My subsequent analysis will focus on three areas in which the Ungerian and Singerian accounts are inadequate to address these international realities: the first of these involves the structure of relations between the world’s well-to-do and severely economically disadvantaged, sometimes directly, but more often as mediated by the instruments of nation states, corporations, international financial institutions and compacts; the second relates to the finitude of natural resources which have been and continue to remain instrumental to the maintenance of living standards in the industrialized world; and the third regards a preoccupation with aid over development.

Poverty in Context: Global Structures

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” said the fat man to the thin man. “If a foreigner saw you before he saw anyone else he would think there was a famine here.”
“And if he saw you next,” replied the thin man, “he would know the reason for the famine.”

Mahmood Mamdani

It is popularly believed that the North, beginning with the historic Bretton Woods agreement to provide support for post-war reconstruction and development in 1944, to the 1970 United Nations General Assembly commitment to contributing 0.70% of industrialized economies’ GNP to development purposes, on through the 1974 adoption by the United Nations of a statement calling for a ‘New International Economic Order’

159 Mahmood Mamdani, Associate Professor of Science at Makerere University in Kampala, delivered a version of this anecdote on March 19, 1985 during an address to a Red Cross conference on disaster prevention. As recounted in Hancock, p. 177.

requiring international resource transfers and global structural changes\textsuperscript{161}, and up to present-day disbursements amounting to billions of dollars of bilateral, multilateral, project and private development support, has dedicated significant resources to sincere attempts at ameliorating growing levels of global poverty. Much of the available evidence appears to contradict this claim. What has actually been ‘given’ with one hand seems to have been more than compensatorily snatched back with the other in a process that could be considered merely Pyrrhic were it not for its exceptional ability to satisfy the guilt of the North and to wreak devastation in the lives of those poorest who disproportionately assume the burdens of global efforts ostensibly designed to assist them.

**International Financial Institutions**

Much of the critique of modern development structures and institutions has been leveled at the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank) and its sister organization the International Monetary Fund (IMF). While the official mandate of the organizations has been to attack poverty and provide stability to developing economies, a veritable deluge of academics, NGOs, Southern activists and other observers from across the political spectrum have suggested, over the course of the history of these institutions, that they have managed to achieve only the converse\textsuperscript{162}. The recent Meltzer Report, commissioned in 1998 as a condition of continued American support of these United Nations-affiliated bodies, confirmed a sizable number of the allegations:

\begin{quote}
While diplomatic in its language when discussing the IMF, the report finds little of redeeming value in the institution. It shows that the Fund’s foray into macroeconomic reform via structural adjustment institutionalized economic stagnation, poverty and inequality in Africa and Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s. It confirms that the Fund’s duty of ensuring a stable global financial order was derailed by its prescription of indiscriminate capital account liberalization for developing countries, its habit of assembling financial rescue packages that simply encouraged moral hazard lending and speculative investment, and its prescribing tight fiscal and monetary policies that merely worsened the situation in the crisis countries instead of reversing it.\textsuperscript{163}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{162} Literature on the subject of the harm caused by the World Bank and IMF to the world’s poorest is legion and for the most part unbridled and strident. Some recent treatments of the subject are found in the works cited in footnotes below.

The World Bank appears to have fared no better. While some maintain that it has not been an *abject* failure, few outside the organization appear ready to contradict a history apparently replete with failed industrial projects in its early years and unsuccessful attempts at catalyzing small-scale ventures in its latter. Many of its large-scale initiatives have been found to displace thousands of rural poor with little or no compensation, and/or left in their wake populations more assuredly marginalized and dependent on external aid than at any time in their history. Reports of the World Bank’s own assessments of the percentage of its programs deemed to have been unsuccessful range from 37% to 70%.

The most commonly cited culprit of decades of irremediable failure, irrelevance and at worst, damage inflicted by both has been the famed commitment to tying development assistance to structural adjustment programs (SAPs). As a prerequisite to receiving assistance from either of the organizations, a sizable number of developing nations have been required to instigate a series of economic reforms including devaluation of currencies, liberalizing impediments to movement of capital, reducing tariff barriers, and slashing of government spending on health, education, social services and agricultural subsidies. Unsurprisingly, not an insignificant number of these changes have been beneficial for industrialized economies seeking ever-larger markets for their products and easier access to them. Yet the effect on the supposed beneficiaries has been crippling in some cases. Most affected by the tightening of national government belts have been women and the poorest of the poor. In fact, most indications are that hunger, malnutrition, illness and illiteracy have increased, not waned, as a result of forced economic reforms with an underlying thrust towards “the creation and maintenance of a world capitalist system in which multinational corporations can trade, invest and move


168 These have, in varied forms, also been termed Structural Adjustment Facilities and Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facilities in the past. See Marcia Burdette, “Structural Adjustment and Canadian Aid Policy” in Pratt, p. 210-216. More recent incarnations of similar programs go by the term Poverty Reduction Growth Facilities (PRGFs).
capital without restrictions from national governments”169. In recognition of its historical negligence to attend to the needs of the most vulnerable, the Bank and Fund have attempted to soften the face of their demands by placing greater emphasis on ensuring that the most marginalized are not abandoned. These reforms have come under criticism for being disingenuous public relations stunts rather than sincere humanitarian initiatives focused on poverty reduction170.

**Whatever Happened to Keynes?**

Equally widely criticized on the basis of ideological intrusiveness has been the unmitigated subscription throughout much of the history of these organizations to a neo-classical or trickle-down approach to development economics - what John Kenneth Galbraith has called the horse and sparrow theory - “feed the horse enough oats and some is sure to pass through onto the road for the sparrows”171. The prevailing defense of painful adjustment programs has been that they establish the conditions for developing nations to become, in the longer term, centres of rapid growth and expansion which then benefit all sectors of a population. The evidence seems to indicate that such is not always or even frequently the case. Rather than lifting all boats, the rising tide of globalization and freer markets seems instead to primarily benefit those with access to capital, leaving the landless and poorest ill equipped to handle the resulting deluge172. “Rapid economic growth in the low-income countries brings modern airports, television, express highways and air-conditioned shopping malls with sophisticated consumer electronics and fashion labels for the fortunate few. It rarely improves the living conditions of the many”173. The post-war (John Maynard) Keynesian ideal of economics with a social conscience, of using the state and international financial institutions to attend to those concerns which the market itself would not spontaneously correct for,

---


173 Korten, p. 42.
seem to have been abandoned in the neoclassical race towards self-guiding, omniscient markets\textsuperscript{174}.

The growth-leads-to-poverty-alleviation theory may in fact be gainsaid by the experiences of the likes of Japan, Korea and Taiwan, whose economic successes have been attributed to exposure to the global economy only \textit{after} establishing local economic health based on state intervention to achieve high levels of adult literacy and basic education, redistribution through land reform and the promotion of small-scale rural industries\textsuperscript{175}. As mentioned earlier, even heavier social intervention combined with strong civil society and stakeholder participation has vaulted the Indian state of Kerala to what amounts to celebrity status in development studies for its unique achievements in the developing world in the areas of literacy, population growth, life expectancy, women’s empowerment and relative social harmony\textsuperscript{176} in the face of a world and time otherwise enamored with policies of growth with little regard for the distribution of its benefits\textsuperscript{177}. Indeed, the World Bank’s laissez faire policies have themselves been charged with being contradictory: “If the Bank is so much in love with market forces, why doesn’t it just get out of the Third World altogether and see how things would arrange themselves without its money? I think that the world might in fact be a better place if only because some would have more breathing space... to change the policies of their own country.”\textsuperscript{178}

The significant international push towards open markets and freer flow of goods is of course the mainstay of the now controversial World Trade Organization and its predecessor, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). The power and influence of trade and growth oriented policies has the accelerated modification of agrarian systems towards production of export-oriented crops, a trend with largely colonial origins. The resulting vulnerability to market gyrations appears to be further

\textsuperscript{174} Roy Culpeper, “What’s Wrong With Mainstream Economics?” in Beamish and Sanger.


exacerbated by the Northern practice of flooding markets with heavily subsidized and devalued commodities. Without the muscle of Transnational Corporations (TNCs) who control a growing proportion of trade in the world’s food supply as well as its production, small-scale agricultural concerns in the developing world are being increasingly strong-armed into accepting terms of trade beneficial largely to those with economic and bargaining clout - Northern consumers and TNC shareholders. In addition, tariffs and import barriers on developing world goods remain inordinate despite recent trade developments. Protectionism, the World Bank itself admits, costs developing countries more than they receive in official aid each year.

**Capital without Borders**

The expanding influence of TNCs has of course, been the subject of significant recent controversy and demonstration. While growth-focused and libertarian defenders of the productivity and efficiency of market forces cite the unprecedented wealth generated

---

179 Amartya Sen’s analysis of the causes of frequent famines in the Sahel attributes a portion of the blame to increased vulnerability due to commercialization and dependence on external trade. (Sen 1981, pp. 126-127).

180 Lappé, Collins, Rosset and Esparza, p. 90.

181 A discussion of the growing control of TNCs over India’s productive land and the seeds used to cultivate it, as well as the effects of the process on the landless and existing family-owned farming ventures is provided in Vandana Shiva, *Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply*. (Cambridge: South End Press, 2000), esp. pp. 1-20.

182 Dot Keet, “Implications for Developing and Least Developed Countries”, in Anderson, p. 126.


Additional statistics from Oxfam International cite Canada as the worst perpetrator of tariff barriers to the import of developing world goods: “Trade restrictions in Canada cost the least developed countries an estimated $1.6 billion, approximately five times the value of Canada’s aid flows to these nations... For every $1 that Bangladesh receives from Canada in aid, it loses another $36 through trade restrictions.” (From Oxfam International, *Rigged Trade and Not Much Aid: How Rich Countries Help to Keep the Least Developed Countries Poor*, (London: Oxfam International, May 2001), p. 10).

184 Widely publicized protests at the site of recent international financial and political gatherings in Seattle, Washington, Prague, Quebec City and Genoa, though reflective of a wide range of concerns, seem primarily targeted at the growing power of corporations and the absence of democratic control over globalization processes (Michel Hardt & Antonio Negri, “What the Protesters in Genoa Want”, *New York Times*, July 20, 2001). Of course, accounts and defenders of the benefits of an increasingly integrated trade world are also legion. An interesting if dubious example is proffered by Thomas L. Friedman, Foreign Affairs Columnist for the New York Times, in his analysis of the promises and pitfalls of globalization, where he forwards his “Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention: No two countries that both have a McDonald’s have fought a war against each other since each got its McDonald’s.” (*The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1999) esp. pp. 248-275).
in recent years by corporate profitability\textsuperscript{185}, those concerned with considerations of equity and impact on the poorest bemoan the flight from rural, subsistence agriculture to urban, industrial-sector, low-wage employment for those displaced by the forces of the merciless market\textsuperscript{186}. Also of concern are distortions in the distribution of the benefits of corporatization. At roughly the turn of the century, the world’s three richest individuals by net worth (Bill Gates, Warren Buffet and Paul Allen) commanded a combined income greater than the 600 million that live in the world’s 48 least developed countries\textsuperscript{187}. The flight of capital to locations least likely to offer labour and environmental code resistance is now widely acknowledged, yet those TNCs who refuse to position themselves to take advantage of such global freedoms find themselves punished by investors, shareholders and eventually Northern price-conscious but consequence-naïve consumers. All this, in the midst of a commonly accepted morality that widely holds corporations to be distinct entities with limited responsibility to those external to its machinations\textsuperscript{188}: “Companies ought to act in their own self-interest, not become vehicles for promoting social agendas. Companies don’t have social responsibilities, or morals or ethics; they are inanimate objects that maintain their existence by meeting legal requirements. Since they are inanimate, they are amoral.”\textsuperscript{189} Presumably, such values prove instrumental in allowing corporations to look askance at statistics evidencing their potentially invidious effects on the world’s poorest:

According to UNICEF, 1.5 million infants die each year because their mothers are induced to replace breast-feeding with artificial breast milk substitutes (made with unclean water). UNICEF attributes the fact that only 44% of infants in the developing world (even less in industrialized


\textsuperscript{187} Bello 2001, p. 211.

\textsuperscript{188} See Alex M. Marcoux, “Business Ethics Gone Wrong”, \textit{CATO Policy Report}, May/June 2000, Vol.XXII, No. 3. The libertarian publication assails the evils of corporate social responsibility as “fundamentally antagonistic to capitalist enterprise” and of stakeholder theory as premised on a “flawed conception of ethics” that slings “an albatross around the neck of the free market”.

\textsuperscript{189} James Westaway, “Philanthropy is for Individuals” (Business Ethics Column), \textit{Globe and Mail}, September 25, 1997, B2.
countries) are breast-fed to the relentless promotion of breast-milk substitutes.\textsuperscript{190}

The expanded role of corporations has no doubt played a significant role in fuelling the unimpeded march of material progress, spurred largely by industrialization and consumerism in the developed world. Now spreading increasingly to Southern nations, the juggernaut, it has come to be widely recognized, is taking its toll on the planet’s resources and ability to compensate. Climate change, the rupture of the ozone shield, land and soil degradation, accelerated deforestation, fisheries collapse and diminishing biodiversity are a few of the now well-known consequences of these trends, caused largely by the activities or demands of the rich\textsuperscript{191}. Perhaps most striking for its implications for the North-South divide is the disproportionate dissipation of the planet’s non-renewable resources by the affluent. William Rees, a University of British Columbia ecologist, in a widely publicized research, calculates that if everyone on earth were to assume the standard of living of the average Canadian or American, we would require at least three earths to sustain the concomitant levels of consumption\textsuperscript{192}. The value of raw materials used to produce food from livestock in the United States - the most egregious consumer of the world’s natural resources - has been deemed greater than the value of all oil, gas and coal consumed in that country\textsuperscript{193}. The G7 industrialized nations, with approximately one-fifth of the world’s population, consume approximately four-fifths of the world’s goods and services\textsuperscript{194}.

Many who find such observations about the North-South impact and relations disconcerting may attempt to seek solace in the knowledge that the developed world has at least, if nothing else, provided development aid to the poorest nations for over 50 years now. Yet that too is a claim of some contention. Perhaps the most striking of revelations to arise from the organizations designed to carry out humanity’s duty to assist

\textsuperscript{190} Lori Wallach and Michelle Sforza, \textit{The WTO: Five Years of Reasons to Resist Corporate Globalization}, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999), p. 52.


\textsuperscript{193} Boucher, p. 103.

the marginalized has been that the net flow of bilateral and multilateral capital flows has principally been in the direction of South to North as a result primarily of the cost of debt servicing. Between 1984 and 1988, the IMF became a net recipient of $4.2 billion from developing countries\textsuperscript{195}. The World Bank has collected more funds from interest and principal payback of its loans to developing economies than it has paid out. In 1992, the World Bank earned a profit of $1.13 billion\textsuperscript{196}.

These observations point to socio-economic relations between rich and poor strikingly at odds with the usual conception of the South as draining the resources of the world through (wasted) foreign aid. Martin Kohr, President of the Third World Network, while addressing a New York conference in 1992, provided the following response to a questioner surprised at Kohr’s lack of enthusiasm for recent developments towards intensified and freer world trade, given that, presumably, the developing world would require an expanded production and consumption base to raise its standard of living to that of the West:

\begin{quote}
I think you have it backwards. Those who most depend on an expanding economy are not Malaysians or other Third Worlders, but you in the first world. In your world, you no longer have contact with the land, and you don’t know how to get along without luxuries. For us, if the whole global trade system collapsed, we might be better off... We wouldn’t mind having some of the new technologies that you offer, and some kinds of trade are very useful, but if the Western colonial powers and transnational corporations would simply leave us alone, stop exploiting our resources and land so we could again retain their use, we could probably survive quite well. But what would you do?\textsuperscript{197}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{195} Tomlinson, in Swift & Tomlinson, p. 26.

\textsuperscript{196} Development assistance has been notoriously sensitive to the needs of donors. In 1993 alone, Canadian consultants received $56 million worth of work from the World Bank - about 8 times the amount the World Bank paid to African experts, where it has the largest concentration of projects (Stackhouse 1994, D3). Nor have bilateral programs been based on pure altruism - the foreign aid budgets of the vast majority of industrialized economies is largely provided as tied aid that must be expended in the donor country (Hancock pp. 155-157), and has been widely criticized as serving first as an instrument of donor foreign policy rather than poverty reduction. Israel and Egypt, for instance, rather than some of the least developed nations of the world, have historically been the largest recipients of U.S. foreign aid. In 1994, the two nations combined accounted for a staggering 47% of all American overseas development assistance (Steve Suppan, \textit{United States Report: Implementing the Commitments}, (Montevideo, Uruguay: Social Watch/Third World Institute, 1997), p.1).

\textsuperscript{197} As paraphrased by Jerry Mander and recounted in Mander and Goldsmith, pp. 17-18. Italics added.
The depiction of several salient and remarkable features of the institutionalized relations between the affluent and the poor in the modern world provides a stark backdrop against which the claims of Unger and Singer can be brought into sharper relief.

The preponderance of those critiquing Singer and Unger’s relevant arguments in the literature appear to accept the nature of the two authors’ central claim; these critics are often in accord with some sort of principle by which the relatively wealthy are obliged to support development assistance efforts to eradicate or ameliorate poverty. However, they commonly take exception to the magnitude of the obligations prescribed by Singer and Unger. I want to shift the focus and suggest why Singer and Unger’s positions may actually be inadequate in the nature of the obligations which they allege fall out of morality. While it will be beyond the scope of this discussion to suggest what the results of taking such an objection seriously might be, I point to several significant issues unjustifiably absent or veiled in Singer and Unger’s analysis which could well form the subject matter of an extended, more comprehensive examination of the obligations of the affluent that was more firmly rooted in and responsive to the contingencies of some of the aforementioned relations that presently prevail between the world’s affluent and poor.

**Moral Implications of Systemic Failures**

The first and chief deficiency in the arguments of Unger and Singer in this regard is their failure to address, or to underscore the crucial need to attend to address, the question of how best to arrange social, political and economic structures so that they do not perpetuate the very crises and circumstances that necessitate beneficent action and development aid in the first place. Unger’s focus on the provision of ORT to a distant child, and Singer’s analogy of rescuing a drowning child at little cost, are commendable for their simplicity and heuristic value. Yet in the absence of any attempt to further develop these analogies to move beyond simplistic conceptions of aid and towards more

---

198 The empirical picture here painted of the often pernicious impact of the world’s fabric of global relations on the South is not incontrovertible or unassailable. Given the plethora of plausible critiques in the literature of globalization and poverty however, claims that the poor have not been deleteriously affected by the implacable forces of growth-oriented policies and institutions seems doubtful at best. For a contrarian (and often indefensible) tack on these issues, see P.T. Bauer, “Western Guilt and Third World Poverty” in Bauer 1981, and Milton Friedman, *Foreign Economic Aid: Means and Objectives*, (Palo Alto: Hoover Institute, 1995).
sophisticated analyses of poverty victims in their larger social contexts, the same tools become red herrings.

Given, for instance, the accuracy of UNICEF’s claim regarding the widespread use of breast milk substitutes due to corporate advertising, Unger’s enjoinder to dispatch monies to relief organizations providing ORT packages could more plausibly be modified to a moral obligation to ensure that corporations desist from engaging in practices that contribute to the incidence of diarrhea: “It is not always appropriate to work only at the grassroots - especially if there are elephants stomping the ground”199.

Similar such reasoning may generate obligations: to influence the workings of the international financial institutions so that their policies do not inadvertently set in place the conditions of famine by rendering export-oriented cash crop farms excessively vulnerable to commodity price gyrations; to advocate for the proper inclusion of labour standards in trade compacts in order to ensure that the working poor have the means by which to purchase the requirements of subsistence; to support the implementation of financial speed-bumps such as the so-called Tobin Tax to mitigate the destabilizing impact of rapid flows of capital to and from developing economies; to rally in support of the election of developing world governments which prioritize social services, health and education or of affluent governments that push for the creation of a debt forgiveness arrangement or an international income redistribution tax in their role as vehicles to efficiently execute the moral obligations of their citizenry200.

Each of these examples, and the virtually unlimited alternative avenues of advocating to amend the rules and norms of international finance and policy to be more responsive to the needs of the most vulnerable, appear in large measure to contrast distinctly with the kinds of sacrifices that are the focus of Singer and Unger’s arguments - namely, financial

199 Brodhead, Herbert-Copley & Lambert, p. 147.

200 I am not suggesting that these would necessarily be some of the moral obligations generated from the consideration of a more robust conception of global inequalities and injustices. Which of many courses of action would have the greatest likelihood of effecting the needed reform is an important factual question widely engaged in, in both philosophical and non-philosophical circles. Nor do I mean to assume that the requisite action should be limited to fiddling with existing social and political institutions and “settling for the few crumbs we might get from a capitalist social order” rather than adopting wholly new systems based on something like participatory socialism or Marxism that “treat production to meet human needs as central and capital accumulation as secondary and instrumental” (Quotes are from Nielsen, in Pennock and Chapman).
contributions towards relief organizations. This is not to suggest that assuming a burden of non-financial contributions to poverty relief would exhaust one’s relevant moral obligations and leave one free to spend one’s financial resources as pleased - the optimal balance of obligations between financial and non-financial contributions is an important question not easily resolved. Nor is it to suggest that one’s moral obligations to bring about changes in social and political structures, if these did exist, could not effectively be fulfilled by making financial contributions to political and social-reform-minded development and charitable organizations. But Singer’s prescription in *Famine, Affluence and Morality* suggesting that we ought to direct contributions towards famine relief, population control and general economic development appears shallow in relation to the complex nexus of factors and relations that conspire, often tacitly, to keep the poor poor.

A concerted effort to expand a consideration of obligations of direct aid to take account of potentially unjust international structures, as I am suggesting is crucial, would by definition be commensurate with a shift from the considerations of the duties of individuals to those of collectivities - be they corporations, institutions, nation-states or otherwise. This would appear to be a crucial component of any such wider analysis of our moral obligations. Moving from an inquiry regarding the duties of *individuals* to those, additionally, of *collectivities* brings with it the potential benefit that the latter, acting through the institutions that represent them, could act as more effective vehicles to fulfill the duties of the former. This may be achieved, for example, through a legally enforced tax on the world’s wealthy, if this was determined to be an apt means of bringing about the intended result of lifting the poorest from the margins of subsistence. It may also provide the benefit of what has been called respite in relation to poverty alleviation:

---

201 This raises a tension within development organizations between relief on one end, and political advocacy on the other. While there may be a trend for these organizations in moving from the former to latter, it has not been without resistance. David Gordon, for instance, in his review of Unger’s work, suggests that in order to give fair reading to Unger’s argument, we should substitute for UNICEF some other charity not “given to addlepeated socialistic nonsense”. (He ultimately dismisses Unger’s plea to “enslave ourselves to the greater glory of UNICEF” and suggests that if one’s “theory arrives at nonsense, it is time to reconsider”). See David Gordon, “With Charity Toward Too Many”, *The Mises Review*, (Auburn, Alabama: The Ludwig von Mises Institute, Spring 1998).

202 Brian Barry has proposed the implementation of a tax on governments of rich countries assessed as a proportion of GNP linked to per capita income with the proceeds being distributed directly to poor countries on the basis of a negative income tax, in lieu of a tax on foreign trade which may unjustifiably favour nations with the ability to internally meet their own energy, goods and resource needs. He also favours a separate levy on income tax on the world’s (relatively) rich individuals, to be channeled to a reformed international World Bank-like body to support humanitarian relief and development efforts (Barry, in Pennock and Chapman, pp. 241-243). Kai Nielsen, agreeing in principle, responds that such a
It is not necessary or desirable for each conscientious individual constantly to confront the hollow-eyed stare of every hungry child in the world, as if at every meal hungry beggars sat in the shadows waiting for you to finish... If mediating institutions have a sheltering psychological effect, that is good. Nurses are not more effective while on duty if their off-duty hours are haunted by images of their suffering patients, nor is anyone's performance of his duties improved by his being so preoccupied with them that the remainder of his life is deprived of satisfaction...Cooperation and coordination can be achieved by organizing, and they can be achieved over the long term through the establishment of institutions, as everyone knows very well - except, it seems, moral philosophers, who tend to think in hopelessly individualistic terms\textsuperscript{203}.

Additionally, integrating the satisfaction of the moral obligations of the affluent into the workings of legally enforced social practices in this manner may offer the additional advantage of defusing the practical effect of a common objection to Unger and Singer. The concern is that an individual's obligations to eliminate poverty should be limited to what would be required if all affluent individuals were to do their fair share. To ask any more than this of those who abide by the dictates of morality would be to penalize them by requiring them to pick up the slack of free riders in addition to having them shoulder their proportionate share of the burden\textsuperscript{204}. Arranging social institutions such that development contributions are required on pain of running into the law would rather conveniently dispel at least a portion of this anxiety and the moral conundrums to which it gives rise.


\textsuperscript{204} Liam Murphy provides an excellent examination of this problem in which he rejects a 'limited' principle of beneficence which gives proportionally greater weight to the interests of the moral agent but takes no account of the effect of reduced compliance by others. He defends a 'co-operative' principle that does not demand more of agents as compliance by others decreases (in "The Demands of Beneficence", \textit{Philosophy and Public Affairs}, Volume 22, Issue 4, August 1993, pp. 267-292). Shelly Kagan rejects the idea of a principle of beneficence sensitive to the extent of compliance by others by suggesting that if two people at a dock with many life preservers noticed two others drowning, it would not suffice to save only one of the drowning persons if the other potentially rescuer refused to do his or her 'fair share' (in "Replies to My Critics", \textit{Philosophy and Phenomenological Research}, Vol. LI, No. 4, December 1991, pp. 924-925). L. Jonathan Cohen in turn rejects reasoning similar to Kagan's on the basis that we must beware the "paradox of the heap" - that is - we ought to make a distinction between having to save one life directly such as in the drowning person example versus having to save many lives in the developing world because others do not do their share. Ignoring the difference leads to a moral code that encourages people to be free riders in the knowledge that someone else will be required to fill in for them (in "Who is Starving Whom?", \textit{Theoria}, 47, 1981, pp. 65-81). Luckily, the perspective of justice that I point to above leads us away from use of the ubiquitous drowning person cases and their analogues.
The second concern regarding Unger and Singer’s perspectives which I want to suggest emerges from the rather gloomy world portrait provided in the previous section, and one which we would do well to incorporate into a proper analysis of obligations to the poor, involves questions of the appropriation and use of the planet’s natural resources.

If we assume that a significant portion of the wealth and standard of living of the industrialized world is partially or largely predicated on the appropriation and use of the world’s natural resources, the Ungerian and Singerian question of what portion of their assets wealthy individuals are obliged to contribute to poverty eradication turns out to be premised on a claim that is not self-evident. Namely, it is an open question, and an important consideration of justice, whether or not the citizens of the industrialized world can be held to be the rightful proprietors of those fruits of the earth that are commonly used and abused in the process of maintaining lifestyles of relative material plenty. If these natural resources can in fact be defended as being under the stewardship or possession of the world’s affluent, we can then reasonably attempt to determine what portion of its proceeds should be morally required to be forsaken in the interests of bettering the lot of the poor. If the citizens of the industrialized world cannot defend a right of acquisition to the natural resources under their feet and around them, it is difficult to see how they might be able to defend a right to the financial resources that are generated from the use of these resources. The question of what the affluent owe to the poor thus becomes even more problematic.

Yet the issue of how one comes to legitimately acquire and appropriate natural resources has proven historically and philosophically troublesome. Nozickean defenders of private property and acquisition rights are prone to provide the Lockean response that mixing one’s labour with the earth’s plenty, so long as it leaves “enough and as good for others” (i.e. the situation of others is not worsened) and if the resources are not wasted, results in fair acquisition. In response, many of the more socially-minded have asked, apparently without satisfactory response, why we should presume that the world’s natural resources are “unheld” in their original state rather than considered to be under the stewardship of the community of humankind? What is it in virtue of, in other words,

---

that enables Albertans and not Algerians (or even the Quebeccois) to lay claim to the bounty of black prairie gold several hundred feet below, that would not be considered arbitrary from the moral point of view? These are fractious and intricate issues of significant relevance to the questions which Singer and Unger address. Without some proper attempt at resolution, any purported answer to the moral-obligations-to-reduce-poverty question would appear to be premature:

To talk about what I ought, as a matter of humanity, to do with what is mine makes no sense until we have established what is mine in the first place. If I have stolen what is rightfully somebody else's property, or if I have borrowed from him and refuse to repay the debt when it is due, and as a result he is destitute, it would be unbecoming on my part to dole out some part of the money that should belong to him... and then go around posing as a great humanitarian.206

My third and final remark by way of suggesting that the relevant arguments of Singer and Unger are insufficiently robust and responsive to the realities of poverty is directed to their heavy reliance on the rather thin notion of providing aid rather than the richer and finer concept of promoting human development.

In my introductory comments, I contended that much philosophical analysis in the field of poverty and hunger has been mired in questions of providing the equivalent of ‘relief’ or ‘rescue’. These may be helpful ways of constructing dilemmas so that they become philosophically tractable (and, at times of famine or emergency, they may be practically accurate descriptions of need). But their use by Unger and Singer leaves them open, I want to suggest, to the charge of inappropriately perpetuating such modes of thought by rendering the idea of promoting human development peripheral rather than central to their analyses. Both authors are careful to note that their arguments are intended only as springboards to generate awareness of our moral obligations to meet the dire needs of others, and should not be taken as indicating what kinds of development assistance would be most appropriate. Yet neither is able to adequately make the crucial transition from the idea of helping to meet people’s needs - whether through famine relief or ensuring that they have access to the requirements for subsistence - to that of promoting the creation of environments that enable them to flourish as human beings. As Amartya Sen has now been widely recognized for arguing, development refers to a process that involves promoting human capabilities via freedom to pursue chosen life goals, quite apart

206 Barry, in Pennock and Chapman, p. 249.
from increasing economic productivity/income or maximizing welfare/utility. In regards to food and nutrition for instance, Sen argues that nutritional status depends not only on the availability of food per head in a community, but on distributional considerations as well as other factors such as a person’s age and sex, metabolic rates and body size, activity levels, medical and climactic conditions, social needs of entertainment and communal meals, education and knowledge of nutritional matters and access to medical services. The object of the enterprise of dealing with ‘food problems’ should be to enhance individual capabilities to be well nourished as well as other basic human capacities. Food, goods and services on this view are not seen as valuable in themselves, but in what they can do for people. Hunger, starvation and famine are abhorrent not merely because of their disutility but because they effect restrictions on freedom and the command that people have over their lives.

Adopting a more refined notion of the goals of international development along such lines could trigger several key benefits relevant to our analysis. At the level of international institutions, it may require responding to some of the aforementioned currents underlying recent frequent and high profile ‘globalization’ demonstrations - presumably the perceived or actual whittling away of the power and control of citizens to shape their future at the expense of the escalating ability of private enterprise to determine global social agendas. One might envision, in a more enlightened treatment of the subject of our obligations to the poorest, a reasoned defense of the duties of the affluent and powerful to promote transparency, public participation and equitable distribution of decision-making authority within the supra-national structures and financial institutions now so widely feared and fiercely distrusted. Or perhaps to generate a heightened awareness of the absolute necessity, still all-too-often dismissed even after five decades of development programs, of responding to and involving directly the intended beneficiaries of development programs in their planning, design and implementation. Venturing further, a proper consideration of such questions of justice may enjoin the materially comfortable to vie for more progressive and enlightened corporate charters that hold directors and shareholders directly, publicly, morally and legally accountable for the devastation that they wreak on the environment or the lives of the most vulnerable. Yet the potential for exploring the possibilities of involving employees and affected communities in the

208 Ibid., p. 188.
decisions of, say, Talisman Energy on their presence in Nigeria and Bristol-Myers Squibb on their antiretroviral pricing policies in South Africa, or even of examining the moral implications of radically overhauling the very structure and nature of the modern corporation so that it is geared towards meeting real human needs rather than merely accumulating capital, is far removed from the project of Singer and Unger. The requirement to contribute towards charitable development agencies seems emaciated and oddly simplistic without a fuller account of and commitment to the idea of human flourishing through empowerment and self-determination:

The most important goal of development is not economic growth per se, but rather the strengthening of the capacities and power of the majority poor to improve their lives through access to land, credit, appropriate technology and jobs, and training... Development is therefore not merely a cluster of social and economic benefits allocated to people in need at the discretion of outside agencies and governments. These social, economic, cultural and political needs arise in response to unjust structures of society and therefore development must ultimately contribute to the restructuring of social, economic, and political relationships.

In Defense of Justice

One wishing to defend Singer and Unger against my accusations here may suggest that I have been less than generous in my interpretations of their writings. In fact, it could be argued, both Singer and Unger would very likely be ardent supporters of considering the appropriate rearrangement of social and economic institutions so as to minimize their damaging effects on the world’s poor. Consider again the primary normative claim that Singer advances - *if it is in our power to prevent something harmful or bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, then it is our obligation to do it*. If we consider unjust social and economic structures to be bad, which presumably we do - the Singerian defender might offer - we have in front of us a principle that obliges us to act so as to bring it about that such structures are no longer unjust, unless it comes at the expense of something morally worse. Voilà, a principle of great strength and flexibility! Unger too, it might be advanced, reminds us that our moral obligations may not be completely fulfilled by making financial contributions to ORT programs, but may also extend to a requirement to support political initiatives.

209 Tomlinson, in Swift & Tomlinson, p. 34.
I propose two possible routes of rejoinder here against Unger and Singer - one hard-line and the other more complaisant. The latter would be a response something like the following. Let us grant that Singer’s principle is in fact flexible enough to take into consideration varying kinds of morally unacceptable states of affairs, including the state of affairs of a world of systemic injustices of the kind that perpetuate poverty. On this account, we would indeed be obliged to bring it about that unjust structures are properly reformed. In this case, the objection to their arguments shifts to being one of emphasis. Singer’s original paper, as well as subsequent revisions, are devoted almost entirely to defending the claim that most affluent individuals owe to the poorest of the world a substantial transfer of resources in the mitigation of poverty-induced suffering. Yet only in passing does Singer make mention of the possibility that we should perhaps also be trying to adjust the skewed David-and-Goliath type trade relations that prevail between the poor and the wealthy. Unger, for his part, expends 154 pages in constructing a formidable case ostensibly in favour of a proposition that we should be sending money to UNICEF or Oxfam to directly prevent the premature loss of distant children’s lives, one paragraph of which is devoted to discussing the possibility that we should also take “political” action. So while the authors’ normative claims may indeed be defensible, the conclusions which they purport to draw from them are misleading and, given a proper understanding of the roots of poverty, unjustifiably centred on ‘saving children’s lives’ directly, or donating money to famine relief. In the process, they contribute to a widespread misunderstanding about how the affluent might, in their everyday actions (say, holding mutual funds that benefit from Nike’s parsimonious wage policies in Indonesia, refusing to protest against their government’s withdrawal from the Kyoto accord, or purchasing certain types of tea) be complicit members of the workings of a super-complicated global set of cogs and wheels whose tacit products include the continued disempowerment of the world’s poor.

There is an alternative, more stringent, possible response to the allegation that I have misconstrued, or straw-manned, Unger and Singer’s position. It looks like this. Neither Singer nor Unger, in their own writings, begins with empirical premises that are comprehensive, multidimensional and realistic enough to embrace the reality that the moral ‘badness’ which should be the primary subject of our concern, is international injustice rather than deprivation due to poverty. Thus, though the normative premises of both philosophers may be sound, their thin empirical assumptions regarding the causes of poverty limits the outcome of their arguments, at least in the writings they provide us, to
enjoinders to transfer our wealth to the poorest so as to lift them from states of material deprivation. Not only does this make Singer and Unger guilty of perpetuating the kind of misunderstanding described in the softer response to the objection, but its effect is to gloss over a more fundamental concern. Singer and Unger’s conclusions are devoted to having us improve the condition of the economically worst-off. But that may not be the whole of it. Empowerment (of the poor) through the just arranging of institutions is an entirely different value than welfare satisfaction or meeting basic material needs, the latter of which is the overwhelming focus of Singer and Unger’s arguments. Thus, while the Singerian principle, and Ungerian reasoning, may provide the opportunity to generate an obligation to create a more just society, both authors fail to avail themselves of it. In so doing, they leave themselves open to the central objection of this chapter: to focus on providing aid over promoting justice is to fixate on symptoms rather than causes. It is not enough to say that Singer or Unger’s principles can account for the lacuna if given the chance - the point is that it exists at all.

It is my contention that whichever of the above two ripostes one chooses to use, it would appear to be difficult for Unger and Singer to defend themselves against the claim that, sound reasoning and compelling analogies aside, they may have missed the forest for the trees here.
Chapter III: The Cost of Living Morally

The forgoing comments bring to a close the arguments that form the central body of this work. In the concluding remarks that follow, I provide a review of the main contentions of this thesis. I then take the liberty of briefly highlighting, in broad strokes, several areas of further consideration that may prove instrumental in gleaning a proper appreciation of, and providing further grist for the cerebral mill in reflecting on, the true obligations of the affluent towards the world’s less fortunate. I end with some speculative comments regarding the concern that ethics is too demanding in the sacrifices it asks of moral agents.

Looking Back

I began this project with the remark that its roots lay in humble hopes of being able to shed greater light of reason on the question of what it means to live morally in a world rife with human deprivation. What I have accomplished could not be seen, all things considered, to have been anything but modest. Nevertheless, we have made some progress.

To recapitulate: beginning with what are perhaps the two most challenging philosophical accounts of the obligations of the world’s wealthy to the poor, the established baseline was that of Peter Unger and Peter Singer in their common claim that it is both in the power and a moral duty of almost every affluent individual to contribute far more than is commonly believed to assisting distant others who would otherwise perish or experience easily preventable suffering. Rather than founding their contentions on a particular ethical theory, a strategy which would limit the audience to whom the premises might be acceptable, the authors’ use as a starting point case studies and thought experiments about which most of us already share common intuitive assessments. Both writers use as their base certain principles and moral stances which the majority of us already hold. Uncovered and exposed to the light of day through the great philosophically demystifying tool of the test for consistency, these principles suggest that almost all citizens of the industrialized world, in failing to contribute sizable portions of their resources to the
cheap relief of suffering in the poorest countries, are likely to be engaging in lifestyles and behaviours that are unjustifiable and reprehensible from the moral point of view.

Such accusations are not easy to stomach. I undertook to examine three widely cited objections to it, and indicated areas of deficiency in the underlying reasoning of each which, I suggested, ought to shed doubt on the defensibility of using these as a means of warding off the demands of morality, or at least the particularly stringent variety of it espoused by Unger and Singer. I argued that the metaphor of the lifeboat was based on empirically flawed premises regarding the relation between poverty and population growth, muddled reasoning, and an insufficient appreciation of the links between carrying capacity, population, and consumption of natural resources. From there, I proceeded to examine a challenge to the strict impartiality of morality and suggested that beyond certain minimal partial commitments that could themselves be justified from an impartial perspective, a departure from the principle by which the interest of everyone matters and matters equally requires a more convincing defense than appears possible if it is going to be plausibly used to trump the obligation to easily relieve distant death and suffering. Finally, I explored various means of limiting one’s potential obligations to those who are socially or physically distant. I suggested that in a world so increasingly interwoven and interdependent, it was difficult to see how artificial boundaries between individuals of different nations, communities, geographical locations, races and loyalties were able to carry any moral weight in determining the scope of their obligations of beneficence. I forwarded the suggestion that the ordinary-morality conception of being morally bound only to those who are within one’s clan or fold is a relic from a now-antiquated conception of the world as a set of isolated communities.

Despite this failure to find a convincing objection to Singer and Unger via several popular routes, I cited a glaring omission or failing in these authors’ argument as presented. Against the backdrop of a portrait of global relations and practices which seem carefully if unconsciously structured so as to facilitate the perpetuation of the status quo in international economic and social inequalities rather than to challenge it, I proffered that despite the compelling normative logic of the Ungerian and Singerian thesis, without a more robust conception of the kinds of systemic injustices that perpetuate poverty, their respective arguments would yield devastatingly simplistic and emaciated prescriptions for improving the lives of the world’s most impoverished.
These of course do not exhaust the set of objections that can and have been leveled at the primary thesis of Singer or Unger. We could hardly be said to have provided either confirmation or negation of their radical assertions through consideration of a few objections to them. But what we have been able to determine, bringing the arguments of previous chapters together, is that the conclusion of Singer and Unger about our obligations to the poor, properly modified so as to account for duties not only to contribute to development assistance but also to address injustices, may be more defensible against some of its most popular attacks than is widely thought to be the case. Though we have reached no decisive conclusions, the actions and behaviour of most of the world’s affluent, in this light, begin to look suspiciously more like they are premised on unjustifiable rationalizations of selfishness than merely on reasonable skepticism.

**Sketching the Landscape Ahead**

One of the most unambiguous findings emerging from the foregoing analysis is that the task of determining the true nature and extent of the obligations of the affluent is one of striking breadth, depth and complexity. In the interest of viewing this work in the context of that larger project, I want to look ahead to provide a most general sketch of the horizon of significant arguments and areas of further inquiry which, aptly considered, would offer us a better appreciation of the true cost of living morally. As I cannot hope to provide these concerns with anything approaching the proper consideration they are due, my remarks will be limited to a skeletal outline of these important further considerations.

*Sacrificing to prevent harm.* The first of these considerations involves the question of the monetary and practical cost of abiding by morality’s dictates to support poverty alleviation efforts. Both Unger and Singer have posed serious challenges to those precepts of common morality which provide the affluent a means of limiting the sacrifices that might be required of them to reduce suffering in relation to the world’s poorest. Singer draws from the stronger version of his proposed principle an obligation to contribute everything we can to assist the poor up to the point where our contributions begin to cause as much hardship for ourselves or our dependents as we would be eliminating elsewhere. Even the moderate version of his principle (which, recall, requires us only to sacrifice
something if it is of no moral significance whatsoever), he posits, would sound a death knell for consumerism, based as it is on trivial spending:

In the world as it is now, I can see no escape from the conclusion that each one of us with wealth surplus to his or her essential needs should be giving most of it to help people suffering from poverty so dire as to be life-threatening. That’s right: I’m saying that you shouldn’t buy that new car, take that cruise, redecorate the house or get that pricey new suit.210

Unger is no less sanguine about the clarity of morality’s dictates. In subsequent chapters of his book, he invokes the thought experiment of Bob’s Bugatti. Imagine Bob, he asks, close to retirement, with almost all of his savings of three million dollars invested in an uninsured valuable car. Inadvertently parking the bugatti a few feet from the end of a railway track to go for a walk, he finds himself beside a switch which, if triggered, would direct a runaway train away from its present course - downstream of which is a child tied to the tracks - and channeling it instead towards his bugatti, which would certainly be destroyed. Unger asserts that if we believe it to be Bob’s duty to pull the switch - which apparently most people do - despite the cost to himself, and given the conclusions he earlier reaches about the moral irrelevance of factors such as propinquity and experiential directness, the principle of ethical integrity requires each of us (rich folk) to do at least as much to save distant children’s lives as Bob did to save this one’s. Unger goes on to reason that, assuming one has met one’s obligations to reasonably provide for the needs of one’s dependents, in the absence of any other special needs, the actual cost of abiding by morality’s dictates, for most of the world’s affluent, will be the sacrifice of a substantial portion of our present accumulated wealth in order to contribute it to such worthy causes as saving distant lives. What more, he goes on to reason, our obligations are not limited to present-day financial ones. Given the absurdly low price of saving a distant child’s life through UNICEF, if it is in our power to assume positions of higher remuneration, say, outside of academe, even at the cost of some enjoyment of our work, it may be morally required to expend what energies we can to shift careers or employers.

Quite clearly, these claims are sufficiently antithetical to the principles of commonly accepted morality as to arouse both public incredulity and academic skepticism. The intuitive reactions of many, and the behaviours of most in the industrialized world, will

suggest that we tacitly accept the requirement to contribute something to the betterment of the impoverished, but not almost everything we own. We want to believe that there is a zone of justifiable self-preferential action that keeps relentless obligations of beneficence/promoting the good at bay, which - to take us back to Nagel’s comment quoted at the beginning of this project - would allow us to acceptably spend the equivalent of the per capita annual income of Bangladesh on a visit to a New York restaurant. How we justify such a zone of self-preferential action will be an important determiner of the magnitude of our obligations to lessen distant suffering.

The limits of morality. Shelley Kagan, in his magnum opus211, accepts the challenge to find justification for these components of ordinary morality. He returns empty-handed. Kagan suggests that those moderates who accept the position of ordinary morality which permits a wide range of self-preferential actions but occasionally requires sacrifice to assist others, have a difficult time finding within morality some justification for their stance. For the position of the moderate to be defensible, she must, in order to avoid a retreat into ethical egoism (the position of the minimalist212) be willing to accept that there is a pro tanto reason to promote the good - a standing reason to carry out that action that would promote the most good prior to the consideration of any countervailing obligations. But, Kagan finds, if one accepts such a reason to act, it becomes difficult to argue for the existence within morality of options, defined as limitations on what is morally required. The existence of options is what creates a category of actions that are praiseworthy but not obligatory. To make matters worse for the moderate, she must, in order to defend ordinary morality, also defend the existence of constraints, defined as reasons which sometimes limit what the moderate may do in the pursuit of promoting goodness (e.g. “I may not kill my rich Uncle Albert even if doing so would be the only way to guarantee that his millions get spent on famine relief”213). Clearly, Kagan’s argument is dense, detailed and nuanced, but its upshot is that only the position of the extremist - one committed to promoting the good but who does not accept the existence of constraints or options - appears defensible. Thus, the limits to our obligations that are commonly believed to exist are vacuous. As a significant indictment of ordinary morality, Kagan’s


212 The minimalist position can also be that of the nihilist (who believes that everything is morally permitted) or the extreme libertarian (for whom there is no obligation to aid others, but that there is an obligation not to bring about harm).

challenge raises profound questions for the obligation-to-alleviate-poverty thesis. If Kagan’s account is plausible, Unger and Singer are indeed correct in presuming that, in so far as it would contribute to an overall reduction in suffering, the affluent are required to sacrifice the majority of that portion of their income and wealth which is above what would be necessary for their own subsistence.

**Harming in order to promote greater good.** Kagan’s analysis of the existence of constraints may be seen to be an important concern, in and of itself, for the larger project of determining the extent of our obligations. Unger, again in chapters subsequent to the ones primarily addressed in this work, cites and uses a pair of case studies similar to *The Envelope* and *The Vintage Sedan* to arrive at an even more strenuous conclusion. In *The Marina*, you are the caretaker of an expensive yacht owned by a billionaire, and have the opportunity to save the life of a swimmer at the cost of a million dollar’s damage to the boat, which you cannot and will not pay for on your own. In *The Accountant*, one of the clients at the company that you work for is a billionaire. You have the opportunity to transfer, without being noticed and without anyone - including the recipient - being able to trace it, one million dollars from the billionaire’s account to that of UNICEF, where it will be used to save the lives of ten thousand children. Unger argues, through painstaking detailed assessment similar to his analysis of *The Envelope* and *The Vintage Sedan*, that the intuitive assessment of most - that the proposed action would be moral in *The Marina* but not *The Accountant* - is indefensible, as there are no morally relevant distinctions which could ground our intuitive divergent reactions to the cases. Unger’s suggestion that we are sometimes obliged, by our true moral values, to bring about relatively small harm to some in order to bring about great benefit to others, is another gauntlet tossed in front of our ordinary, common-morality assessment of what it means to live morally in a rich society.

*International Justice.* As I have earlier argued, the construction of a conception of international justice, daunting and mammoth as the task may be, will be an important precursor to and component of a thesis about the true cost of living morally in the North. Two particularly salient contributions and approaches to the issue have utilized Rawlsian/contractarian and rights-based normative frameworks. In the former, Charles Beitz\(^{214}\) argues for the need for an international principle of distributive justice to allocate

\(^{214}\) Beitz 1979.
the benefits and burdens of international co-operation and of the arbitrary worldwide
distribution of natural resources. He suggests a version of the Rawlsian difference
principle (whereby, roughly, inequalities in distribution are justified only in so far as they
are to the benefit of the least advantaged) being an appropriate one for the international
case and one that would require significant alteration in the structures of domestic and
global institutions as well as transfers of resources and wealth from rich to poorer
nations and individuals.

Employing a rights-based methodology, Henry Shue\textsuperscript{215} provides a provocative argument
for considering subsistence rights to be of equal lexical priority to the rights of liberty and
security so often taken for granted as of ultimate import in the Western world. If sound,
the argument for the existence of rights to the necessities for subsistence generates
respective duties, which, given that one is required on Shue’s account to sacrifice
anything but one’s basic rights in order to honor the basic rights of others, results in
significant obligations of the affluent to meet other’s essential needs. In the process,
Shue outlines a renowned argument for casting doubt on the crispness of the putative
distinction between positive and negative rights. He provides a compelling example of a
scenario in which several pieces of land, previously the source of subsistence crops for
area villagers, are leased to affluent interests from the capital. These individuals alter
farming practices and produce export-oriented flowers largely using machinery rather
than human labour. This results in job losses, restriction of access and entitlement to
subsistence crops, and ultimately to scarcity of food for those villagers with insufficient
land to benefit from such commerce or to grow their own food. All this takes place,
ostensibly without any one person or institution having violated a ‘negative’ right of
another not to be denied the requirements of subsistence. The argument provides
compelling defense of the thesis that the well-off needn’t \textit{do} anything egregious other
than be at one end of a superficially innocent global trade arrangement in order to have
violated the rights of another, shedding new light on our obligations to amend unjust
global practices. The question of the distinction between positive and negative rights, and
of harming versus failing to aid, has a distinguished philosophical history. Shue’s analysis
underscores the need for further work in this area applied particularly to the global arena.

\textsuperscript{215} Shue 1980.
Psychological Explanation. The final area of inquiry I want to highlight here is an empirical one. I mention it because its outcomes may have significant impact on the plausibility of some relevant normative arguments. A tacit concomitant of the arguments of Unger and Singer is that the faith we normally place in the validity of our intuitions regarding our obligations to the distant suffering may be somewhat misguided. Both authors challenge our apparent deeply held moral convictions on this issue. Unger, engaging in psychological conjecture, offers an explanatory thesis regarding how our first-blush moral assessments can diverge so strongly from our true moral commitments. He suggests that one of the culprits lying behind this apparent discrepancy is what he refers to as conspicuousness. The dominant factor gripping our reaction to The Vintage Sedan scenario, for instance, is the conspicuousness of the need of the bleeding birdwatcher - the extent to which the situation holds and attracts our attention. But UNICEF seeks our aid for children whose needs are anything but able to dominate our thoughts and haunt our consciences thereafter (unless we happen to see television images of them, hear ‘band-aid’ type tunes devoted to them, or are given descriptive written accounts of their lives). While such inconspicuousness is of obvious psychological relevance, surely, Unger ventures, its absence cannot be held against the children as a morally determining factor.

Kagan too, provides a reasoned explication of a similar idea, arguing that our mental images of the consequences of actions or the needs of others can be pale and theoretical (such as when we are told that smoking is harmful) or vivid (such as when we are shown images of a cancerous lung). In regards to the situation of others, our understanding of their needs becomes more vivid as we process an influx of information about them or understand their circumstances through mental representation in ways that bring their positions somehow closer to our own experience. Kagan argues that were we able to make all our beliefs vivid, we would tend to act in accord with the impartial point-of-view, giving each person’s interests no more or less weight than they are due. On this account, the human capacity for self-reflection and the ability to place ourselves in others’ shoes, increasingly exercised, would presumably allow us to incrementally overcome the beguiling influence of what Unger calls conspicuousness in regards to the needs of distant others. The capacity to adopt the impartial perspective is strengthened through the exercise of the faculties of sympathetic imagination in the face of the dire needs of others. In this way, the work of Unger and Kagan in areas of moral psychology
may turn out to be of significant import to understanding our variable intuitive reactions to distant versus proximate and conspicuous suffering.

These five sketches of important further considerations in regard to the duties of the prosperous are by necessity compacted and stripped of important context, and by no means meant to be mutually exclusive or exhaustive. But by presenting them I attempt to both facilitate a better ability to locate the arguments presented in this work within a larger philosophical enterprise, and, for those as the writer concerned with how to live, to open up challenging opportunities for exploration of many of the problematic theses presented therein.

**Ethics is too Demanding**

By way of concluding comment, I want to flag a philosophically interesting, pragmatically relevant, and strangely disconcerting response to the conclusions proposed by the likes of Unger and Singer, but one which is aimed - rather than at their particular normative position - at the very enterprise of morality itself. While a full and proper dissection of its rationale will not be possible here, it seems to me important to provide it at least brief visit and to gesture in the general direction of suggesting why its reasoning seems inadequate generally, and particularly so in response to the demands of world hunger and poverty.

It may be claimed\textsuperscript{216}, as against the dictates of Unger and Singer on this issue, that even if the reasoning of these authors is sound, their conclusions are too demanding. Morality, the concern is raised, must be pragmatic if it is to have any effect at all. We live in a world of imperfect beings, and to expect perfection, or even to ask it, is unreasonable. In order to be relevant and sensitive to its environment, time and place, morality must be molded such that it becomes a plausible and motivating force rather than the subject of ridicule. The arguments of Singer and Unger, in their strongest form and in demanding such inordinate sacrifice and commitment to the common good, are more likely to fall into the latter than former category.

\textsuperscript{216} See for instance Cottingham 1991; Wolf 1992; and Nagel 1986 (Chapter 10) for such general objections.
In a similar vein, Thomas Nagel has suggested that morality must take into account the vagaries of human nature and the likelihood that the vast majority will not bow to a moral ideal that asks so much of them. Thus we tinker with morality’s requirements in order to:

…take into account the kinds of complex beings for whom it is being devised. The impersonal is only one aspect of their nature, not the whole of it. What it is reasonable to ask of them, and what is impersonally expected of them, should reflect this. We must so to speak strike a bargain between our higher and lower selves in arriving at an acceptable morality.\(^{217}\)

That project, logically extended, could have significant effects on a principle of obligation to assist the world’s economically disadvantaged, however it might be carried out. It would be likely to produce an outcome that took into consideration people’s intuitions about the moral legitimacy of indulging in luxuries and pleasures of the sort difficult to condone from the objective moral viewpoint, and subsequently lessen the impact of those obligations. (For Nagel at least, it seems to result in a profound moral ambivalence towards his restaurant dining experiences).

It seems to me that there exist at least three important ways in which such leniency might be unjustified. The first is that reconstructing a moral theory based on the complex nature of the persons to whom it is directed is a problematic exercise. It raises the question of whether the requirements of morality would be different if we were slightly less or more psychologically complex as human beings. Adapting somewhat an earlier thought experiment of Hume’s, if a peaceful extraterrestrial race, forced to leave their own planet, were to take up residence here and live alongside the earth’s inhabitants, and were they to differ from humans only in being of greater complexity, consciousness, and commitment to each others’ good, would we then construct a two-tiered morality - one for them of great moral rectitude, and one for us, the inveterate sinners? Or if we could find evidence of a genetic predisposition that enabled some humans to more vividly imagine the needs, situations and experiences of others, appreciably increasing their chances of acting from the impartial point of view and of being virtuous and saintly people, would we be required to construct sliding scales of moral (and perhaps legal) requirement to take such exigencies into account? We would hope, somehow, a moral theory to be more constant than that; that it not be subject to the contingencies and failings of human nature.

Second, suppose we were to take Nagel up on the offer to strike a bargain with our higher selves or morality - to split the difference as it were between its requirements and our personal needs. Let us call the result *morality2*. Suppose then, the ethicists of the world, in their media interviews and relations with the outside world, in order to increase the likelihood of compliance and to “reflect an attitude of tolerance and realism about human nature”\(^{218}\), used *morality2* as their public-face standard for evaluation of human behaviour. Yet the public reaction (say, to Peter Singer suggesting that the affluent should donate 50% of their wealth beyond their basic needs to Oxfam) was an overwhelming chorus of response arguing that morality’s demands were too great and would have to be tempered. What would be the rationale for not splitting the difference again, to produce *morality3*? Presumably, the same justification for making the bargain still exists, unless there is something peculiarly morally significant about doing this once, but not thereafter, which Nagel has not quite described. I cannot see how accepting Nagel’s argument would not lead to a situation of infinite regress until the requirements of morality fell to a point infinitesimally above the level of what was previously ordinary, commonly accepted morality. We cannot, I suggest, be moved to draw the lines of obligation or supererogation where it is more convenient for us to do so in order to have them conform more closely with the *status quo*. The bitter pill of morality is often hard to swallow. If it were always easy, our morality would be suspect.

Third, the process of limiting the demands of morality seems oddly insensitive to the needs of those who would be beneficiaries of adopting morality *tout court*. It is no revelation that famine sufferers are not in any less pain because the nature of human beings is ‘complex’. If the representatives of sub-Saharan nations, in midst of drought and famine, were to request grain contributions through the United Nations, surely we could not unashamedly envision Canadian representatives, prodded by a morality-abiding citizenry, in a fit of honesty and transparency, addressing the General Assembly to explain that the nation commiserates with those experiencing such tragedy and grieves for the victims, but, you see, has struck a deal to split the difference between morality and the implacable need to drive sport utility vehicles and vacation in Hawaii, thereby limiting the kinds of contributions it would otherwise be able to offer to the starving.

---

\(^{218}\) Ibid., p. 203.
Humanity may indeed be a complex condition, but one of the advantages it confers on all its members is the ability, whether utilized or not, to be self-conscious, to transcend self and view the world from other perspectives. That this faculty is not exercised to the extent that it might be is hardly sufficient reason to legitimize that shortcoming. The fact that most people in a particular time and place will likely not abide by the dictates of a moral theory is no refutation of it. There is no doubt that morality often may impose duties that seem inconvenient and demanding. But perhaps as a response, rather than reducing the pass/fail grade in human morality, we should be raising our expectations, possibly through advocacy of the need for greater concern for the good of others and for justice, and particularly in regards to the world’s poor. It is at least plausible that promoting greater concern for others and attempting to effect what our society deems an acceptable minimal level of compassion and fairness, especially in regard to those without the means of subsistence, would achieve the result that more individuals would then be inclined to come closer to meeting the full obligations of morality. If Lawrence Kohlberg was correct that an important stage in the progress of human moral development involves being motivated to act because of the social value of doing so, then it seems eminently more defensible to me that our efforts should be directed not towards re-crafting our moral theories to be more amenable to common morality or the structure of human motivation, but molding common morality and human motivation to be more amenable to the demands of morality.
Bibliography


