

**Absence and the Unfond Heart:
Why People Are Less Giving Than They Might Be**

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It is possible to identify with some precision the moment when contemporary philosophers began to ask themselves hard questions about the moral obligations crushing world poverty and the radically unequal distribution of global resources impose on affluent westerners. It was 1972, when Peter Singer published his seminal essay “Famine, Affluence, and Morality.”¹ Singer’s essay stopped readers short not only because it raised the question as it had not been raised before – certainly not by philosophers – but also because it offered a radical and uncompromising answer. We are obligated to give aid, Singer argued, until giving any more would hurt ourselves more than it would help recipients. (Singer also provided a more moderate conclusion for the faint of heart, although it was clear he thought the uncompromising answer came nearer the truth.) Singer recently restated this view in less abstract terms: “for a household bringing in \$50,000 a year, donations to help the world’s poor should be as close as possible to \$20,000. . . a household making \$100,000 could cut a yearly check for

¹ *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (1972), reprinted in Charles Beitz et al., *International Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

\$70,000. Again, the formula is simple: whatever money you're spending on luxuries, not necessities, should be given away."²

If we judge an argument's power by whether it propels hearers to act on its conclusions, Singer's project would have to be deemed a failure; those possessing the degree of moral commitment his view demands are few and far between.³ But that lapse has itself contributed to important turns in the philosophical debate. What is the relationship between reason and motivation: does believing that one ought to do X entail that one is moved to do X? What is the role of intuitions in moral reasoning: does the fact that Singer's conclusion conflicts with common sense mean that common sense is wrong, or that Singer is wrong? Along with these metaethical questions remains the pressing substantive, practical one with which Singer began: what in the way of humanitarian assistance do people who have enough, and more, owe to those who do not?

The question looms largest for contemporary utilitarians, who generally argue that we ought to maximize utility, and thus have to explain why we should not spend every spare minute and every spare dollar doing good (or preventing harm).⁴ But it also confronts moral philosophers of other persuasions. There is nothing inherent in the notions of deontological rightness or virtue-ethical goodness that limits the sacrifices we have to make to prevent human suffering; it all depends on the particular deontological or virtue-ethical view one holds.

² Peter Singer, "The Singer Solution to World Poverty," *New York Times Magazine*, 9/5/99.

³ Singer included, it seems. Singer gives twenty percent of his income to alleviate poverty. (Michael Specter, "The Dangerous Philosopher," *The New Yorker*, 9/6/99, p. 53.) While this is far more than all but a tiny fraction of people give, it still falls far short of the principle outlined in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" and more recently in the *New York Times* article.

⁴ For a discussion of the reasons classical utilitarians did not focus on maximizing utility and therefore did not confront this issue, see Judith Lichtenberg, "The Right, the All Right, and the Good," *Yale Law Journal* 92 (1983), pp. 544-63.

It would be a mistake to conclude that the contemporary philosophical preoccupation with these questions should be attributed to Singer alone. Singer's essay appeared just when Anglo-American ethics and political philosophy were awakening from a long slumber during which metaethics and conceptual analysis dominated. The publication of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* in 1971 and the birth of the journal *Philosophy & Public Affairs* the same year signaled an interest in substantive moral and political questions that has only intensified in the ensuing decades.

Several broader historical and social factors coalesced in the second half of the twentieth century, I believe, to propel the preoccupation with the sorts of questions Singer has raised. They can be captured under several headings: affluence, awareness, power, and egalitarianism.

Affluence. Although there have always been affluent people in the world, by any standards there is a growing number of them, concentrated mainly in a few industrialized countries. I shall not try to define "affluence"; I mean to include not simply the very rich but all those with a relatively high standard of living who enjoy luxuries.

Awareness. Technological advances in telecommunications and transportation mean that the affluent are conscious as they never had to be before of the condition of poor people around the world. Equally important, poor people perceive as never before alternatives to the material conditions in which they find themselves.

Power. Technological advances in health care, agriculture, and other fields also mean that the condition of poor people is in principle more remediable than ever before. We are in a position to affect living conditions to an unprecedented degree. (Unlike the other factors, power in this sense is not a property of individuals but applies to states of

technological development. But it affects individuals' perceptions of the possibilities of change.)

Egalitarianism. Finally, the growth of liberalism and egalitarianism, I believe, has rendered the condition of poor people and the glaring gap between the haves and have-nots increasingly painful to both. As the belief that each person is born to a certain station and must submit to his fate recedes into the past, we find less tolerable the knowledge that some people are fortunate enough to be able to fulfill their potential while others are not.

* * *

This account makes a certain amount of sense. Whether it has moved people, changed anything, is another question. Moral philosophers *are* preoccupied with Singer's problem. But do they behave any differently from their predecessors, or from contemporaries who do not think about these questions for a living? There is no evidence that they do. (Remember, even Singer falls far short of his ideal.) Of course, there is no necessary inconsistency here. Singer's argument stimulated discussion, but that is not to say it produced agreement. A good deal of the reaction, predictably, consisted of attempts to show why Singer must be wrong.

This is not difficult, it turns out. However compelling Singer's argument might appear to some, it is simple to knock down. Everything hangs on the premise that "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it."⁵ The opponent may argue that what we would have to sacrifice (our "projects," the ability to lead our lives, within certain limits, pretty much as we choose) is "of comparable moral

importance.” Or, alternatively, she may simply point out that the premise, which appeared at first so innocuous, is upon closer inspection highly controversial.

Many people, philosophers and nonphilosophers alike, want to knock down Singer’s argument. They want not to believe it, because it is so hard to live by. Among the thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of students who have been exposed to Singer’s views, my sense is that the reaction is generally unbelief – that we definitely do not have a moral obligation to help to any great degree, if at all. Recently, my students in an introductory ethics course covering the death penalty, abortion, and international ethics – including, in this last part, a section on just war theory and one on global poverty – mentioned in their course evaluations that these last subjects “had nothing to do with them.” (Why they seemed more irrelevant than the death penalty – I doubt there are many murderers among or around them – tells us something worthy of further inquiry.)

There is also more concrete evidence for our resistance to Singer’s message. Although charitable giving in the United States increased in 1999 by nine percent over the previous year, to \$143.7 billion, these figures amount, for individuals, to only 1.8 percent of personal income.⁶ More important, since 1960, charitable giving has declined as a percentage of per capita income: “Total giving by living individuals as a fraction of national income fell from 2.26 percent in 1964 to 1.61 percent in 1998, a relative fall of

⁵ “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” in Beitz et al., *International Ethics*, p. 249.

⁶ Karen W. Arenson, “Charitable Giving Surged Again in ’99, by an Estimated 9%,” *New York Times*, 5/25/00, citing a report by the American Association of Fund-Raising Counsel. Personal giving has not been as high since 1973. These figures include giving to all kinds of charities. The largest proportion (\$82 billion) went to religious charities, with educational organizations second (\$27.5 billion). “The sharpest gain in percentage terms was to organizations focused on international affairs, like Doctors Without Borders and the United Nations Foundation, although the total still remained relatively small” (\$2.7 billion). Of course some of the funds received by religious charities such as Catholic Charities no doubt goes to poverty and disaster relief.

29 percent. In 1960 we gave away about \$1 for every \$2 we spent on recreation; in 1997 we gave away less than \$.50 for every \$2 we spent on recreation.”⁷

These figures fall far short not only of Singer’s recommendations but even of the more modest ten percent – the tithe – traditionally recommended by the Christian and Jewish religions. The tithe may be traditional, but it is by no means ordinary. By the standards of what most people actually do, giving ten percent of one’s income is a great deal.

We can also look at these matters collectively, in terms of U.S. foreign aid. Next year’s U.S. foreign aid budget is \$13.3 billion, of which only about half is for “humanitarian and development purposes” (the other half is for “national security”). As Jeffrey Sachs of Harvard puts it: “Each year the average American is asked to pay a grand total of \$4 in taxes toward helping the world’s poorest 600 million people.”⁸

I am troubled, and also just curious, about the discrepancy between what we know about the extent of global poverty and suffering, and how most of us live our lives. I speak of “the discrepancy” in order not to beg the question of what our obligations are. (Every argument for higher levels of assistance risks sounding sanctimonious, every argument against it invites the accusations of smugness and rationalization.) Indeed, I shall address that question only indirectly here, for reasons that will become clear in the next section. My main interest is in the gap between what we could and perhaps should do and what we in fact do, and how that gap might be bridged.

⁷ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), p. 123.

Justice, charity, and moral obligation

Almost everyone believes it is a very bad thing that hundreds of millions of people in the world suffer from crushing poverty, malnutrition, disease, and lack of education. The question is what these bad states of affairs imply for those who are in a position to relieve them. Philosophers have framed the issue in different ways. Mainly they have distinguished between justice and charity, and between obligation and supererogation. Do we have a moral *duty* or *obligation* to help distant strangers in need, or are such actions morally *optional*, however desirable they might be? Does justice require that the rich assist the poor, or is assistance a matter of charity? These questions are not necessarily identical, but for many purposes they are equivalent.

How you answer these questions depends in part on how you think the current distribution of wealth and poverty came about. If you think the poor are poor in part because of what the rich have done, or if you think the rich are rich because of what they have done to the poor, or if you think that rich and poor are in any case entangled in a set of significant economic or other relationships, then you are likely to say that the rich should help the poor as a matter of justice, and that they are under an obligation to do something.⁹

Suppose, however, that the poverty of the poor has no causal connection with the affluence of the rich. Determining causal connections and the truth of counterfactuals is often difficult, which is one reason those who advocate aid may prefer not to rely on them. On the other side, the argument that you should help because you are at least

⁸ Quoted in Paul Krugman, "Delusions of Generosity," *New York Times*, 7/19/00, p. A29. As Krugman points out, however, the paucity of our foreign aid budget may be due to misinformation rather than, or as much as, stinginess. See the section below on "Overestimating our generosity."

partly at fault possesses a certain compelling quality that an argument not dependent on fault lacks. Some will conclude that if the rich had no part in making the poor poor and if the poor had no part in making the rich rich, then the rich are under no obligation to help the poor, however much we might hope that they would help and praise them if they did.¹⁰ Perhaps we should even condemn them if they do not help – but still, on this view, we must resist saying they are under an obligation to help. Not acting may be indecent, Judith Thomson would say, but it violates no obligation.

Whether we agree with this view or not, years of observing student reactions to Singer-inspired examples prove its appeal is undeniable. It's the idea of *obligation* that sticks in people's craw. There is a deep libertarian strain in our thinking – perhaps this is characteristically *American* thinking? – according to which you do not have positive obligations to do things unless you have in some way contracted them by previous agreements or actions.

The conclusion is not, of course, inevitable. Singer relies on no causal claims about how poverty or other suffering came about, yet he nevertheless concludes that the haves are obligated to help the have-nots. Although he does not speak in terms of justice, he clearly believes that giving aid is not morally optional.

⁹ Many of the terms in use are loaded. Terms like “help,” “aid,” and “assistance,” suggest that the person who aids is not causally responsible for the situation of those who need aid; they suggest charity and optionality rather than justice and obligation.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), and Judith Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (1971). Thomson's famous examples loom large: the person finding himself hooked up to the violinist, who needs his body for nine months, or the person whose life can only be saved by “the touch of Henry Fonda's cool hand on my fevered brow.” You have no right to these things, according to Thomson, even though it would be “frightfully nice” of Henry Fonda to fly in from the West Coast. Nozick's view is similar: talk of rights and obligations is misplaced unless one person has harmed another or unless there exists a contractual arrangement between them.

English usage is fuzzy here. “Charity” suggests to many people the optional and the supererogatory, yet the religious injunction to tithe suggests otherwise. The Hebrew word *tzedeka* is often translated as “charity,” but literally means “justice” or “righteousness.”¹¹ Of course, if charity is not optional, the apparent moral contrast between charity and justice may be illusory. But in English, at least, “charity” seems to many people to have that ring: something that it is good to do, but that one should not be criticized for not doing.¹²

Whether we use the terms “charity” or “justice,” we may think that the important question is whether giving aid is morally optional or morally necessary – whether we should be congratulated for giving it or blamed for not giving it. Yet on reflection it is not clear what it means for something to be morally optional or morally necessary, or how such matters can be determined.

G.E.M. Anscombe’s classic article “Modern Moral Philosophy” sheds some light on the issue. Anscombe argued that the concept of moral obligation makes no sense outside a legal or juridical framework.¹³ Terms like “obligation,” “is required to,” and even the moral “ought,” she said, come from Christianity, which has a “*law* conception of ethics” deriving from the Torah.¹⁴ She contrasts Aristotle’s conception of ethics.

Why does Anscombe believe this? She thinks such terms imply a lawgiver who imposes the obligation or moral requirement, and metes out punishment for disobedience.

¹¹ See, e.g., Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy* (New York: Morrow, 1991), pp. 511-12. Similarly, *mitzvah* is often translated as “good deed,” but literally means “commandment.”

¹² See Singer’s discussion of these issues in “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” in Beitz et al., p. 254. Kant provides an intermediate view with the idea of imperfect duties. We have duties to help other people, according to Kant, although we have discretion as to “time, place, and manner” about how to discharge these duties. It might be argued that the elbow room Kant allows is so great that in effect it lets people off the hook and makes charity supererogatory in spirit if not in letter.

¹³ “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 33 (1958).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

If God is not at the helm, these concepts no longer make sense. Secular philosophers may find Anscombe's claim unconvincing, either because they accept Kant's view that the rational individual can replace God as the lawgiver, or because they understand the moral requiredness of an act to mean simply that not performing it would be wrong.

Nevertheless, I believe there is something to Anscombe's idea. To speak of moral obligation is to speak of moral necessity. The implication is that you must act (or not act), *or else*. Or else what? Or else you will be punished; or else there will be consequences. In the case of most standardly accepted moral obligations – not to kill or to torture or to take what is not yours – there are external consequences of transgression in the way of legal punishment and/or social disapproval, as well as internal effects such as guilt and self-recrimination.

But suppose there are none of these. We are to imagine that Jane has a moral obligation to do something, but that no one will punish her if she doesn't, no one will strongly disapprove of her, and she will feel no guilt. In this case, the *or else* condition of moral obligation seems to be unmet.

The secular philosopher who rejects Anscombe's theistic framework may have an answer: or else you will be a bad person, a person below the moral minimum. But however common and tempting a reply it is (and I've made it myself many times), it is not very satisfactory. To make it satisfactory would require, at the very least, a much fuller explanation than is normally given; we may suspect that a persuasive one is not forthcoming.

In our society (perhaps in most societies) the "or elses" that normally accompany moral obligation are lacking in the case of the practice of charitable giving. There are no

legal consequences; social disapproval is largely absent; and few people feel much guilt about not giving more (for reasons I shall pursue shortly). For these reasons we must be skeptical of the assertion that people have such moral obligations.

This is not to deny that it is extremely desirable for people to give more than they do. The assumption that it would be good for people to give more is one I think needs no defending; I at least do not have the patience to defend it. If some people have less than enough to lead decent lives and others have much more, that is a strong *prima facie* reason for thinking that transfers of goods ought to take place. My disagreement with those who claim we have extensive moral obligations to give is not with their sentiments or the direction their views would take us; it is with the language of duty and obligation. People do not have extensive moral obligations to give aid of the sort that Singer has argued for. The consequences requisite for obligation – punishment, whether legal or social, and personal guilt – do not exist in our society to a sufficient degree. And in fact the claim of obligation is likely to be counterproductive. It tends to produce resentment rather than increased levels of giving.

Instead of arguing about the limits of our obligations to give aid, we should think about what stands in the way of people giving more, and how best to overcome these obstacles. I turn now to these questions.

Abstractness

Other people's suffering is almost always abstract. It's hard to appreciate the pain of a friend's backache, let alone the hunger of distant peoples. A few years ago, I suffered for several weeks from a painful case of bursitis in my left hip. Having never

experienced significant pain before (except for childbirth) lasting more than very briefly, I found the experience illuminating. So this is what other people with back conditions or migraines (or other worse things) endured! Other people's suffering became vivid to me in a way it hadn't been before.¹⁵

But we have to work to keep the vividness before us, and most of the time we are happy to let the images fade. Few people like to think about unpleasant things, partly because by definition they are unpleasant and also because when they do not take action to alleviate them they may feel guilty, which is also unpleasant. It is especially easy not to think about suffering when (to put it in psychological jargon) the stimuli are not salient and those suffering are strangers – not just people whom we do not know but whom we have never seen, who lack names and faces. In these cases it is not painful to do nothing, as it would be to watch a child drown or an accident victim bleed to death. Just don't think about it, and – for your own practical purposes – it does not exist.

The suffering of strangers is not always abstract, of course. You see the homeless person on the street (or, as is becoming increasingly common, beside your car as you wait for the light to change); you drive through a run-down neighborhood on your way to a nice restaurant; you visit India or Mexico and encounter appalling squalor right in front of your eyes. It's not as if in these cases, where suffering is palpable, people immediately divest themselves of all but the bare necessities in order to help those they see in need. Indeed, it is often said that in societies where desperate poverty is common, people quickly get used to it. (Many of us now regularly see such things on television, which, although not the same as experiencing them in person, does impart a visceralness and a

¹⁵ For a good discussion see Elaine Scarry, "The Difficulty of Imagining Other People," in Martha Nussbaum et al., *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), pp.

sense of reality that might otherwise be lacking. Or does it? The debate has not been resolved: do these virtual experiences heighten our sensitivity, or do they desensitize us by their relentlessness and their virtuality?)

Various psychological mechanisms allow people to go on as usual even in the face of immediate suffering. When bad things happen to apparently good people, observers find ways to cope. The most striking way is documented by social psychologist Melvin Lerner, whose many experiments support the thesis that most people adjust to the existence of suffering by believing in a “just world.”¹⁶ What this means is that when confronted with the suffering of innocent victims, most people will conclude that the victim deserves his fate. Bad things don’t really happen to good people.

Observers adjust in other ways as well. They withdraw from the scene of the suffering, or they deny that bad things are happening or underestimate their badness. So, for example, even when the victim’s plight is grave, he is usually not dying before our eyes. And it is easy to tell ourselves he is not dying at all. His plight is not *so* serious, we think; however serious it is, some other individual or some social institution, or simple luck, will intervene to save him. By contrast, the drowning child the philosopher imagines, as well as many of the social psychologists’ experimental cases,¹⁷ involve acute and imminent threats to life or health. And they involve situations that can be alleviated by a single action.

But the suffering of other people – even strangers or non-intimates – is not always abstract and easy to ignore. Several years ago, I lived with my family for a year in

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¹⁶ See Melvin J. Lerner, *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion* (New York: Plenum Press, 1980).

¹⁷ See the references below in note 31.

downtown New Haven, Connecticut. One day soon after we moved in a man who appeared to be in his thirties rang our bell and asked if we had any work for him. We gave him a few odd jobs, and over the next months he would occasionally come by, tell us about his problems, and ask us for work and money. We gave him some of each, realizing that it might well be a mistake to encourage him. On his behalf we got in touch with several social service agencies. Once we invited him in and gave him lunch. One night at 3 a.m. he called us on the phone – over and over – begging for money. He showed up at our house shortly thereafter, pounding on the door, his drug dealer in the shadows not far off. When the police arrived after we called, they warned us never to have anything to do with him again. That was the last we saw of him.

Some examples involve such chance encounters, others old friends or acquaintances whose lives have not, for one reason or another, gone well. Our experiences of this kind have had several things in common. In each case, we found ourselves drawn into another person's difficulties, and spent a significant amount of time and money trying to help. What was especially striking in the cases that arose from chance meetings was that the relationship was so contingent: we happened to meet or re-meet someone, whose situation was no different from that of many others, and something sparked our involvement. Even at the time I was struck by the contingency of it – how did it happen that *we* came to be involved with *him*, or *her*? – and the thought that there were many others like them that we were “ignoring.”¹⁸ Clearly something about the concreteness of the encounters led us to get involved.

The sense of futility and ineffectiveness

Another typical feature of many such cases – one we would rather not acknowledge – is their recalcitrance. It is harder to help people than we may at first believe. One reason (there are others as well) is that the external problems people suffer from – poverty, lack of education, ill-health – often cause internal, psychological problems that make it even more difficult to extricate from adversity than it would otherwise be. And of course sometimes internal, psychological problems are partly responsible for the external problems. So the well-meaning thought that “if one only did this. . .” then someone’s problems would be solved is overly optimistic. One-shot solutions, few-shot solutions, rarely work. Unlike holding out your hand to save the drowning child, helping someone in need generally requires a major investment of time and resources.

This problem applies not only to the individual, face-to-face cases I have just been considering, but also to the cases of large-scale aid that are our primary focus here. We wonder what proportion of our charitable contributions lines the pockets of bureaucrats, or corrupt dictators. We hear many stories about how aid does not go to the people it ought to.

If we believe these stories that will certainly dampen our incentive to give aid. Of course, it is convenient for us to believe them. But it is also likely that many people would give more if they were convinced that their contributions would go where they ought to go, and for good purposes.

¹⁸ Of course this contingency is a feature of all aspects of human life: if I hadn’t taken *this* job, which resulted from losing that one, I wouldn’t have lived *here*, met *these* people, followed *this* path, met *this*

Overestimating our generosity

Beliefs about the effectiveness of aid are beliefs about facts, about how things are rather than about how they ought to be. But such beliefs have important consequences for people's behavior. There is a further way in which people's beliefs about facts can affect their attitudes and practices concerning giving to others. When asked whether the United States spends too much on foreign aid, about 75 percent of (American) respondents say yes.¹⁹ But underlying these answers are extreme misperceptions of the amount the United States actually spends.

PIPA's poll asked respondents to estimate how much of the federal budget goes to foreign aid. They were told that they could answer in fractions of a percent as well as whole percentage points, thus implying that the amount could be quite low. Nonetheless, the median estimate was 15 percent of the federal budget, fifteen times the actual amount of approximately 1 percent. The average estimate was even higher: 18 percent. Only 7 percent of respondents guessed an amount of less than 1 percent.²⁰

When asked how much the U.S. ought to spend on foreign aid, the median respondent suggested 5 percent of the federal budget – five times higher than the actual amount. The mean response was 8 percent. “When respondents are asked to respond to correct information about the current level of foreign aid spending, an overwhelming majority

partner; if we hadn't conceived on *this* night, rather than that, I wouldn't have had *this* child.

¹⁹ About the same percentage agreed in 1995 polls conducted by *Time*/CNN, the University of Maryland School of Public Affairs' Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), and pollsters Hart and Teeter. When asked specifically about foreign aid to poor countries, the percentages dropped to 43-48 percent, depending on the poll. See Steven Kull and I. M. Destler, *Misreading the Public: The Myth of a New Isolationism* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), p. 123).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

finds it unobjectionable,” confirming the suspicion that miserliness rests at least partly on misinformation.

It would not be surprising if a similar misconception infected people’s beliefs about their own personal giving – if people overestimated the amount they gave to charity. Of course, interpreting such mistakes, if they existed, would not be a simple matter. For believing one gives more than one really does could be convenient and comforting. Nevertheless, being confronted with the realization that one gives less than one had previously believed could change one’s behavior.

Distance

If we’re lucky, suffering typically takes place among people not present to us. Such people are ordinarily both abstract – we don’t know their names or faces or indeed anything personal about them at all, except that they are suffering – and physically distant. Contemporary philosophers often treat distance as an important moral category. They speak of our moral obligations to distant strangers; this volume is concerned with morality and distance. The suggestion is that, with some notable exceptions, a linear relationship exists between moral connection, or the feeling of moral connection, and physical distance. The further away people are, the less tied to them you are or feel. The metaphor of concentric circles morality, which has become prevalent, reinforces this view.

But distance is a misleading metaphor. Clearly moral connection is not a matter of physical distance per se, but rather of relationships that are strongly although contingently connected to it: relationships of family, community, country, and the like.

My parents or my children might live across the country or around the world, but that does not diminish my ties to them. And there are people living only a few blocks or a few miles away with whom I have no felt moral connection at all.

So, it appears, concentric circles morality treats physical distance as a contingently important but secondary factor. What matters more, on this view, is relationships. As many contemporary philosophers have argued – reinforcing a popular view in our and perhaps most other cultures – people feel more tied, and ought to feel more tied, to members of their own community than to outsiders, more tied to compatriots than to strangers. But although this view is practically the conventional wisdom – about how people actually feel if not about how they ought to feel – I think it is much overstated. It is by no means obvious that most Americans are seriously disturbed by the fate of their most disadvantaged fellow countrymen, or that they are more disturbed than they are by the sufferings of Indian earthquake victims or Somalian famine victims. And that is perhaps surprising, since some of those fellow countrymen may live right down the street, or not much farther.

Of course there are other factors at work here as well. We are more moved by acute crises than by chronic crises; the earthquake captures our attention more than the famine, which is more eye-catching than longterm malnutrition.²¹ These differences in what captures our interest and attention are compounded by media coverage, which, capitalizing on what may be natural reactions, in turn widens the gap between popular and forgotten causes.

²¹ The thought processes at work here are no doubt related to those that affect people's attitudes toward risk: people fear cancer more than diabetes, air crashes more than car crashes.

Still, the fact remains that most of us are quite unmoved by the plight of people who live down the street or across town. The explanation, I believe, is not that we are cosmopolitans or universalists, who believe that all human beings are equal and that it is wrong to favor our neighbors or compatriots over strangers. It is rather that although our less fortunate compatriots may not be physically distant, still they are typically nameless, faceless, and *absent*. They are, in short, abstract. Without an intimate relationship of the sort involved in family or close friendships or working relationships, and without the rare serendipitous connections in which people occasionally bump up significantly against strangers, those living down the street might just as well be living across the world.

It is probably impossible to make human suffering on a large scale very much less abstract to the ordinary person than it is now. Most people have only so much psychological room to feel others' pain. It's not at all clear that we would want to make people more sensitive in this way if we could. The suffering most people encounter among those in their inner circle – through death, disease, and innumerable varieties of evil, stupidity, and ill-fortune – is quite enough.

But there is another way we might expand personal giving. I shall advance a simple hypothesis: the most practically relevant reason people are not more generous toward those in need is that other people are not more generous. The implications of this claim are very important: if we want people to give more, we must raise the general level of giving in a society.

There are several reasons why individual giving depends on what others around us are doing. Here I shall discuss three broad sorts of reasons.

The relativity of well-being

To an extent that is rarely recognized, our well-being is relative to the well-being of those around us. I do not mean this in the sense that if those near and dear to us are unhappy, we too will be unhappy. That is no doubt true, but I wish to focus on other aspects of the relativity of well-being.

Most human beings need a certain number of calories, shelter and good health and a few other things to lead even moderately satisfying lives. These goods might be called absolute necessities. But the satisfaction received from material goods beyond the basic level rests in great part on the fact that others around us enjoy these goods.²² This is so for several reasons.

One has to do with the particular infrastructure of one's society and with what economists call networking effects. You may need a car (or two) because there is no satisfactory system of public transportation. The more other people drive cars, the more you need a car; a good system of public transportation makes private cars less necessary. Similarly, you need a computer in an information society to do what you might have done without one in a different kind of society, or to do new things that you would not have had to do in a pre-computer society; without a computer in an information society you fall behind. So what other people around you have is directly, materially relevant to what you need in order to function at a reasonable level.

A second reason for the relativity of individual well-being depends on what we might call salience, to use a term from cognitive psychology, or what the economist

²² For an extended discussion of these issues see Judith Lichtenberg, "Consuming Because Others Consume," *Social Theory and Practice* 22 (1996), pp. 273-97; reprinted in David Crocker and Toby Linden, eds., *Ethics of Consumption: The Good Life, Justice, and Global Stewardship* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

James Duesenberry called the demonstration effect.²³ I never would have wanted a flibertygibbet if I hadn't seen my neighbor's and those ads on TV. I could have lived just as happily without one, had I not been exposed to it. But having seen it, I want one. (How ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm after they've seen Paree?) We can leave open the question of whether I am better off having it, or not having it as long as I don't know it exists: the important point is that if a flibertygibbet is available and known to me, I am better off having it than not having it (for a while, anyway). Here again, my needs and desires for things – and consequently my relative unwillingness to part with the means to those things – crucially depends on what those with whom I have economic, social, and personal relations have and do.

A third reason people's well-being depends on the possessions and practices of those around them has to do with the status functions of material – and some nonmaterial – goods.²⁴ Some people assimilate all the relativistic reasons for consumption to this function; they believe that to want what others have must be a matter of keeping up with the Joneses in the traditional sense. I hope to have shown why this is not the case – why we might want or need things because others have them but not want them simply for status reasons, rather because of infrastructure and networking effects or through salience and the demonstration effect.

Nevertheless, at least part of the reason we want things and are disinclined to part with the means to them (i.e. money) rests on the desire to be seen as at least as good as, or even better than, others around us. In every society, certain things – mostly material

²³ James Duesenberry, *Income, Saving and the Theory of Consumer Behavior* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), pp. 26-27.

things but also some nonmaterial things – function as symbols or markers of respect and self-respect. To be a member of the society with dignity you must possess those things.

No one has improved on Adam Smith’s formulation of the point:

By necessaries I understand, not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even the lowest order, to be without. A linen shirt, for example, is, strictly speaking, not a necessary of life. The Greeks and Romans lived, I suppose, very comfortably, though they had no linen. But in the present times, through the greater part of Europe, a creditable day-labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote that disgraceful degree of poverty, which, it is presumed, no body can well fall into without extreme bad conduct. Custom, in the same manner, has rendered leather shoes a necessary of life in England. The poorest creditable person of either sex would be ashamed to appear in public without them.²⁵

Which things serve this purpose varies from society to society. And, in addition to the “necessaries” that constitute the sine qua non of respectability, there is also a range of objects that serves to distinguish people of higher from those of lower status. Many would argue that these are at least as important, because people do not simply want to be viewed as equal to others, they want to be thought superior.²⁶

²⁴ Obvious examples of nonmaterial goods that perform such functions are schools, educational credentials, and jobs and occupations. In some societies, such as England, accents and speech patterns fall into this category as well.

²⁵ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, originally published 1776 (New York: Modern Library), book V, chapter 2, pp. 821-22.

²⁶ I have discussed this issue at greater length in “Consuming Because Others Consume” (see note 22), pp. 284-90.

But we do not need to settle this issue here. Even if it is superiority rather than equality people are after, the point holds: what it is important for a person to have depends crucially on what others have. Insofar as this is true – insofar as the reasons for consumption are relativistic in the ways I have described – it follows that people could get along just as well with fewer things, living at a lower level of consumption, as long as others in their society did likewise. Getting along on less would not involve a sacrifice of well-being.

The power of shame

Adam Smith alludes to shame in describing the feelings of a person without a linen shirt or leather shoes in a society in which these are considered “necessaries.” Shame can also play a positive role if our goal is to motivate people to act in the interests of others. I suspect it may be more effective than guilt, because shame seems more tied to people’s self-image than guilt and so is more subject to manipulation, particularly in an era like ours where narcissism is widespread.

How could shame be used to propel people to give more? As the habit of giving became more entrenched, those who did not live up to the standard would feel ashamed. An interesting question is whether feeling shamed depends on having one’s failure be known. On the face of it the answer seems to be that it does depend, because shame is inherently tied to how one appears to others. Nevertheless, as we internalize the values that involve shame, we may feel ashamed even when no one actually knows what we do or fail to do.²⁷

²⁷ For a useful discussion, see Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), esp. Endnote 1: Mechanisms of Shame and Guilt.

Experiments conducted by Elizabeth Hoffman and her colleagues shed some light on the phenomenon of shame generally and the extent to which it depends on others' knowledge.²⁸ In these "dictator game" experiments, a subject is asked to divide \$10 between himself and an anonymous counterpart in another room. The subject can divide the money however he chooses and the counterpart must accept the decision. The experiments vary in how much anonymity and social isolation they provide the subject – that is, whether or to what extent others will know what he decides – and these factors affect the subject's decision. Thus, for example, when no one, including the experimenter, knows how the subject has divided the money, he is likely to give less to the counterpart than if his decision is known. In general, the less anonymity and social isolation the subject has, the more she is likely to give the counterpart.

The experimenters conclude that when someone gives up money in a dictator game, he is "consuming" the good of reputation.²⁹ But this is something of a stretch, since typically the subject will never see the experimenter or anyone else in the experiment again. That fact suggests that once the mechanisms of shame are internalized, whether other people actually know what one does may be less important than the subject's awareness of prevailing social trends, which tell him what people *would* think if they *did* know.

Imagine that people's charitable contributions were listed publicly in the newspaper. Or that the contributions of employees of a university or company were listed on the bulletin board or the institution's website. A professor in a law school

²⁸ Elizabeth Hoffman, Kevin McCabe, and Vernon L. Smith, "Social Distance and Other-Regarding Behavior in Dictator Games," *American Economic Review* 86 (1996), pp. 653-60.

recently proposed that faculty members be required to report how much pro bono activity they do every year, and that this information be made public. The measure was strongly opposed by other faculty members.

In a society dominated by the ideals of freedom and individuality, such measures may seem draconian if not Orwellian, and I am not necessarily recommending that we adopt them. But their seeming harshness only confirms the view that most people's behavior is strongly influenced by both the behavior and the opinion of others around them. This is hardly a new and revolutionary idea; there is nothing more common than the view that people want approval from their peers and on the whole prefer to conform to what others around them are doing. If the thought of one's giving habits being known is so horrifying, we must care a great deal about what others think.

Drops in the bucket

Let me suggest one further reason we might be less likely to give unless others give. We can call this reason the "drop in the bucket" effect. Suppose I am thinking about famine in a distant country, or even closer to home. My own contribution, even if generous, will make only a small dent in the problem. Rationally, this should not discourage me; after all, helping only one person or a few people stave off disaster, even if thousands need to be helped, is a fantastic contribution. And if I stop to think about the individual rather than the mass, I may feel motivated. But in these cases we do not know the individuals who would be affected, so it may be difficult to appreciate the value of

²⁹ Ibid., p. 659. Reputation "is largely explained as self-regarding, that is, people act as if they are other regarding because they are better off with the resulting reputation. Only under conditions of social isolation are these reputational concerns of little force."

our contribution. If 60,000 people a day die of starvation,³⁰ and one's contributions could prevent five of those deaths, one is still left to believe that 59,995 people will die.

Looked at in this way, we will not notice the difference. Here again the abstractness of the problem – our lack of acquaintance with any concrete individuals – is likely to dampen our motivation to act.

The “drop in the bucket” effect – and to some extent the other hypotheses discussed in this section – appear to be inconsistent with well-known experiments by social psychologists showing that people are *less* likely to intervene in “Good Samaritan” situations as the number of other bystanders increases. It is worth looking at these experiments to see if indeed they present counterexamples to the view I have presented.

John Darley and Bibb Latané conducted a series of experiments in the wake of the Kitty Genovese murder in 1964, where thirty-eight people watched from their Queens apartments as a young woman was killed outside. In one such experiment, subjects filled out applications while sitting in a waiting room, either alone, or with two other naïve subjects who also filled out applications. Smoke began pouring out of a hole in the wall. Three quarters of the Alone subjects (which included 24 people) reported the smoke before the experimental period came to an end after six minutes. In the three-person groups, of the 24 people in eight groups, “only one person reported the smoke within the first 4 minutes before the room got noticeably unpleasant”; “in only 38% of the eight groups in this condition did even one person report.”³¹ So people were twice as likely to

³⁰ I've heard this figure cited. Reference?

³¹ Bibb Latané and John M. Darley, “The Unresponsive Bystander: Why Doesn't He Help?,” in Zick Rubin, ed., *Doing Unto Others* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 116; see also Latané and Darley, “Group Inhibition of Bystander Intervention,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 10 (1968); Darley and Latané, “Bystander Intervention in Emergencies: Diffusion of Responsibility,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 8 (1968); Latané and J. Rodin, “A Lady in Distress: Inhibiting Effects of Friends and Strangers on Bystander Intervention,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 8

report the smoke if they were alone than if they were in groups. Darley and Latané's other experiments produced similar results.

Darley and Latané offer several possible explanations for these results. One hypothesis is diffused responsibility: each person believes, or hopes, that others will intervene; when fewer are present the sense of responsibility, and the potential sense of guilt, falls harder on each individual. Another explanation is that subjects define and interpret the situation partly by noticing how others define it. When we come upon a person staggering in the street, we may not know whether he is drunk (with the implication that he ought to be ignored) or suffering a heart attack. If we look around and see others paying no attention, we are more likely to choose the former interpretation over the latter – and ignore the staggerer. A related but distinct idea Darley and Latané mention, almost in passing, is that people are concerned about how they appear to others around them, and don't want to make fools of themselves; when alone, people do not worry about their image and are therefore more likely to act.

Rather than disconfirming the view I have been advancing, these experimental results, and the preponderance of the hypotheses offered to explain them, serve to support it. They show that people are influenced enormously by the perceptions and behavior of those around them. If one reason an individual doesn't come to the aid of someone in need is that she thinks others who are not responding will think she looks silly, then the active involvement of others in helping would give her reason to help as well; she might fear being shamed if she didn't help. And if people interpret situations largely by looking

(1969). The experiment I describe here is not obviously a "Good Samaritan" situation: the subject may act to save his own skin at least as much as someone else's. The other experiments conducted by Darley and Latané are pure Good Samaritan cases, but are more complex to describe. The differences do not matter

around and seeing how others interpret them, the “helping behavior” of others will be a spur to their own action.

That leaves only the diffusion of responsibility hypothesis as a possible threat to the view I have been defending. According to this hypothesis, people are more likely to help others if they are alone than if they are in groups because when alone they cannot blame anyone else for the results of their inaction. But the experimental situations this hypothesis is meant to explain differ in important respects from the cases of large-scale aid in which we are ultimately interested, and I believe that these differences makes the diffusion of responsibility hypothesis less relevant, and perhaps altogether irrelevant, to the case of large-scale aid. One difference is that the potential harm in the experimental cases is immediate and palpable, not abstract and distant. When harm is abstract and distant, I would argue that the psychological mechanisms described earlier overwhelm any motivation to act rooted in the fear of guilt and self-criticism. Out of sight, out of mind. A second difference is that in the experimental cases the problem can be solved by a single action, while in the cases of large-scale aid – as well as in many of the real-life individual situations we confront – one-shot efforts are ineffective or insufficient.

Altogether, then, the evidence from these experiments does not pose a threat to the view I have been defending; indeed, it provides confirmation for it.

Conclusion

Philosophers have been preoccupied for more than a generation with trying to decide how extensive the obligations of the more fortunate of this world are to the less

for present purposes. Indeed, it’s interesting that even where the subject’s own safety and well-being are at stake, he is inhibited from acting by the presence of others.

fortunate. I have argued that this debate is beside the point – partly for philosophical reasons, and partly for practical reasons.

The natural motivation to give aid to distant peoples is generally weak and unreliable. (By “distant” here I do not necessarily mean physically distant, for reasons I gave earlier; I mean people not present and not tied to us by close personal relationships.) If we want to equalize resources and improve the well-being of the disadvantaged, we cannot rely on individuals’ altruistic impulses. Instead, we need to harness the powerful human impulse to conform: the dependence of people’s behavior, and their desire for goods and status, on what others around them have and do.

But the impulse to conform presents us with an especially recalcitrant collective action problem. Subjects in the Darley and Latané experiments did not act when others around them did not act, at least in part, it seems, because they took their cues about how to interpret the situation from others and did not want to appear strange or abnormal. How can we change the norm so that the ungiving person is the strange one? It is hard to get from where we are to where we want to go unless some individuals change their behavior, but if I am right individuals will not be strongly motivated to do so unless others do as well.

It seems to follow that we must either rely on some freethinking, free-acting individuals who set an example that others are inspired or otherwise moved to follow, or else think about new ways to design our institutions so that some of the problems I have described here can be overcome. Given the complexity and importance of the issue before us, it is almost certain that both approaches will be indispensable.

(February 1, 2001)

