

BOOK REVIEWS

LIVING HIGH AND LETTING DIE: OUR ILLUSION OF INNOCENCE,

by Peter Unger. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

UNICEF, OXFAM, CARE, and other charitable organizations strive to reduce the suffering and death associated with Third World poverty. These non-governmental organizations (NGOs) live on financial support from the public. The NGOs regularly appeal to Westerners for financial support. Peter Unger believes the average Westerner receives many requests for money from the NGOs and that he typically declines the support. By not giving we are in effect responsible for allowing innocent people to suffer and die. In allowing this avoidable suffering and death to occur, we do what is immoral, Unger thinks. Westerners ought to be giving large sums of money to the NGOs. As Americans today condemn slave owning Americans of earlier eras, the descendants of today's Westerners might condemn us for having allowed so many of the World's poor to suffer and die. Unger's central task in the book is to prove the average Westerner is immoral for not giving large sums of money to the NGOs.

Unger hopes to change how people act and not merely how they think. Evangelically, he aims his discussion "more at promoting moral behavior in the many than at promoting moral understanding in the few" (p. 127). To promote this behavior Unger sprinkles the addresses of NGOs that fight world poverty throughout his text.

The book has virtues. The topic is important, and many of Unger's ideas are fresh and provocative. However, the work is not exacting, and the book contains several striking flaws. In the overall balance of virtues to flaws the book's rating is, among philosophy writings, at best average. I will identify two flaws: 1. Unger's attempt to prove his central thesis, the primary task of his book, fails, and 2. That thesis, as Unger formulates it, is quickly refuted.

1. The reasoning Unger uses to support his position is not tremendously impressive. It is not reasoning philosophers might cite to their students as an example of philosophical reasoning at its best. Unger supports his condemnation of the average Westerner's behavior primarily by appealing to analogies. He depicts a scenario in which a particular kind of behavior seems obviously immoral. He then claims that when a person declines a NGO request for money, his behavior resembles the obviously immoral behavior and is wrong for the reason the obviously immoral behavior is wrong. For instance, Unger describes a scenario in which you own a luxury sedan. Driving your sedan one day, you encounter a stranger with a severely injured leg. You have the chance to help the stranger and enable him to save his leg. Unfortunately, if you help, you damage the leather upholstery in your luxury car. If you choose to protect the upholstery and decline to assist, your decision seems seriously wrong. Unger proposes that for reasons similar to those that make the leather upholstery decision seriously wrong, the decision of Westerners to turn down an NGO's request for money and use the money to buy goods for themselves and their family is seriously wrong.

When using this luxury sedan analogy, Unger assumes Third World poverty induced death and suffering are easily preventable. This assumption is central to his book. In the sedan scenario a person can be confident his efforts to help the injured stranger will succeed. There is no serious reason to suppose his attempt to help the stranger will fail and that he may, while damaging his - and presumably also his family's - car, cause the stranger further harm and leave the stranger worse off than he was before the sedan owner intervened. Unger assumes that when a person sends money to NGOs, he saves lives and reduces suffering. At one point Unger suggests that for every \$3 we send to UNICEF we save a life (p.4), and hence that for every \$3 we do not send to UNICEF a person dies through our inaction. As Unger portrays it, these people die through our self-indulgence. We "live high and let die."

The assumption that suffering and death attributable to Third World poverty are easily preventable is disputed and, stated without serious qualification or detailed defense, appears to be false. Money donated to NGOs does not always reduce suffering and death. Some of the money supports actions that increase suffering and cause deaths. NGOs have become central players in regional

BOOK REVIEWS

conflicts. Humanitarian aid often fuels conflict and is used as an instrument of war.¹ “War lords, rebel leaders and imploding government from Bosnia to Brazzaville now manipulate aid agencies as never before...,” recent reports say.² When NGOs recently tried to help people in Zaire, the army of dictator Mobutu Sese Seko hijacked U.N.-chartered planes and used them to transport guns the army used to battle rebels.³ Mobutu’s men “flew planes — chartered by the United Nations and other groups and emblazoned with the insignia of such agencies as Save the Children and UNICEF — packed with weapons... Many of the guns used in some of the biggest battles of the war ... were flown in on hijacked aid agency planes.”⁴ Newspapers report, “The diversion of food aid to feed troops and militia at the same time as denying relief to contested areas has been widespread.”⁵ They say, “The UN and many NGOs operating in the North (of Sudan)... have continued to provide tacit support for predatory government policies, including the forcible relocation of displaced Southerners from Khartoum.”⁶

I quote these disconcerting claims about the NGOs not to defend the positive thesis that Westerners ought not send money to NGOs. Rather, my intent is to identify one of the many ways in which Unger’s thinking is simplistic and not exacting. The analogies he uses are flawed, and he fails to prove his central thesis by using them. In the analogies the harm is easy to prevent. There is no serious reason to think self-sacrificing, altruistic efforts to help will fail, or that we might, when sacrificing goods of ourselves and our families, make the problem worse than it was before we intervened. Well-intentioned efforts of the NGOs sometimes fail and even create new evils. Accurately to assess the overall, long-term effects of the NGOs is not easy. Philosophers are not ordinarily trained to perform the assessment. Evils born in Third World poverty are born in, and intimately connected to, environments very different from Unger’s middle class America. The cultures, problems, histories, and prospects of the impoverished people are very different from Unger’s. The task of accurately assessing the overall, long-term effects of the NGOs raises many complex empirical issues that do not arise in the assessment of the actions Unger portrays in the simple analogies on which he relies.

2. Suppose, first, most contributions to NGOs make the world a better place and, second, we know this is so. It still would not follow immediately that a person does something immoral if he declines to send money to NGOs

that fight Third World poverty. If Westerners are obliged to send money to NGOs to support them in efforts to combat Third World evils, their obligation to do so is not a basic moral principle. What obligations Westerners may have to assist Third World people stem from obligations a person might have to combat the suffering, death, and other basic evils associated with poverty. These basic evils exist in situations where there is no poverty. As there are times when people are obliged to confront and oppose poverty to combat these basic evils, there are times when they are obliged to combat these basic evils when they are not associated with poverty.

Tracing the bad in poverty to the basic evils that make poverty bad, Michael McKinsey, in a paper Unger does not address, attacks a position of the type Unger endorses. Observing that many people who are not poor suffer, McKinsey notes that a person who attends to the needs of mentally ill people might reduce suffering by attending to the needs of these people. A person who combats suffering in the mentally ill and not the impoverished is not immoral simply for addressing the former's suffering instead of the latter's. Suppose that due to his training and position, a person would be more effective in helping the mentally ill than the poor. This person "ought to help the mentally ill and not the starving," McKinsey says. "To suggest that those who devote their resources (and sometimes their lives) to causes other than the relief of world hunger are thereby guilty of moral wrongdoing" seems false and indecent, McKinsey says.⁷

Supporting the assessments with reasoning that echoes McKinsey's, we might say people who combat avoidable deaths caused by evils other than Third World poverty cannot justly be condemned for not directing their altruistic efforts at Third World problems. When people try to save lives by combating deaths attributable to AIDS, cancer, land mines, or drunk driving, we could not justly condemn them for not combating deaths attributable to poverty.

Insofar as people are obliged to combat suffering and avoidable death their duty extends beyond humans to non-humans. Suppose Rachel battles for manatees and other animals, endangered and non-endangered. She hopes to reduce suffering and death of innocent animals and to help prevent animal species from going extinct. To say Rachel is immoral because she does not dedicate her resources to impoverished persons seems false and potentially speciesist.

BOOK REVIEWS

In conclusion, I have recounted recent criticisms of the NGOs and the corresponding threats to the analogies on which Unger rests his moral contentions. I have suggested that Westerners who altruistically combat evils other than those due to Third World poverty cannot justly be condemned for not directing their resources to combating evils associated with Third World poverty. When objecting to Unger's thinking in these two ways I identify two of many flaws I see in Unger's book.⁸

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NOTES

- ¹ See John Prendergast, *Frontline Diplomacy: Humanitarian Aid and Conflict in Africa*, Chapter 2 (Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 1996), p. 145 and elsewhere.
- ² *Charlotte Observer*, September 28, 1997.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ *War and Hunger*, 1994, p. 61.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 62.
- ⁷ "Obligations to the Starving," *Nous*, 15, 1981, p. 314.
- ⁸ I thank Ken Menkhaus for sharing his expertise on Africa with me.