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Obligations to the Starving

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It is commonly claimed that affluent societies and their members are obligated to come to the aid of persons who are in danger of death due to starvation. In this paper I wish to consider the question of whether principles that ascribe duties of benevolence can provide an adequate basis for such claims. I will argue that the principles of benevolence which are most often appealed to as a source of individuals' obligations to the starving are all either false or do not in fact yield such obligations. It is sometimes claimed that one source of obligations to the starving is the *right* of each starving person to be saved from death due to starvation. I will argue that it is unlikely that many starving persons have this right on grounds of benevolence.

On the positive side, I will propose a principle of benevolence which, I suggest, does yield obligations to the starving, and I will try to spell out the nature and extent of these obligations. The most interesting feature of this principle is that the obligations to the starving which it yields directly are obligations on the part of *groups*, and not individuals. A consequence of this is that the members of affluent societies have obligations to the starving primarily because they are members of groups which have such obligations.

I. INDIVIDUALS' OBLIGATIONS TO THE STARVING

Most would I think agree that the starving and malnourished of the world ought to be helped. But even if we agree to this, there remains the question of *who* is responsible for providing this help. In particular, we need to know what considerations are relevant to determining the correct answer to each person's question "What ought *I* to do about world hunger?"

I believe that many of those who have attempted to deal with this problem have done so on the basis of a certain model, which I will call "the life-saving model". On this model, the relation between each starving or malnourished person and each member of an affluent

society is conceived of as analogous to the relation between a person who is in danger of imminent death (say, by drowning) and one of his potential rescuers. It is of course quite likely that anyone who conceives of the situation in this way will answer each person's question "What ought I to do about world hunger?" by saying "You ought to help the starving, if you are in a position to do so." However, I wish to argue that use of the life-saving model to determine one's obligations to the starving is seriously misconceived.

Peter Singer seems to have the life-saving model in mind when he argues on the basis of the following principle that we ought to help the starving:

- (1) 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.¹

Singer in fact illustrates how (1) is to be applied by pointing out that, according to (1), if a person sees a child drowning in a shallow pond, he is thereby obligated to wade into the pond and pull the child out.

Why does Singer think that (1) has important implications regarding our obligations to the starving? Although Singer is not as clear on this matter as one might wish, his line of reasoning appears to be as follows. It is of course perfectly obvious that any case of a person's starving to death is something bad which happens. It is also plausible to suppose that for any person who is starving, there are many members of affluent societies who can prevent that person's starving to death without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance. From these assumptions plus (1) it follows that

- (2) For any person who is starving, there are many members of affluent societies who ought, morally, to prevent that person's starving to death.

Again, it is not entirely clear that Singer wishes to use (1) to support (2), rather than to support some other claim. But I do not see that there is any additional interesting claim regarding individuals' obligations to the starving which (1) can be used to support.

In [1] William Aiken has defended a view similar to (2). He writes:

The right to be saved from starvation is derived from the more general moral right, the right to be saved from preventable death due to deprivation . . . The sufferer has this right against any and all who are in a position to provide the necessary goods and services, since the sufferer's need puts them under an obligation to prevent his death. (p. 86)

From these words, it is clear that Aiken believes that:

- (3) For any person *x* who is starving, and any person *y* who is in a position to prevent *x*'s starving to death, *y* is obligated to prevent *x*'s starving to death.

Although he later qualifies this claim by adding some necessary conditions which he says a person must satisfy in order to be obligated to save another person from starvation (pp. 91-93), Aiken appears to believe that many people in affluent societies satisfy these conditions with respect to each starving person. Thus Aiken, like Singer, would apparently endorse (2).

Now it is not difficult to see that (1), (2) and (3) are all false. For suppose that there is a starving person whom I am in a position to help, and that I can save this person without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance. By either (1) or (3), then, I am obligated to help this person. But it is obvious that for any such person, there are unfortunately many thousands of other starving persons each of whom I can *also* help without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance. Thus by (1) or (3), I must also be obliged to save each of these persons. But this is absurd, for I *cannot* save *all* of those starving persons each of whom I am in a position to save without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance. Given my relatively limited resources, I can save only a fairly small number of those who are suffering. Thus I cannot be obligated to save all those starving persons whom I can save without comparable sacrifice, and therefore (1) and (3), which imply the contrary, are both false.²

A similar line of reasoning shows that there is *no* particular person whom I am obligated to save from starvation. For any particular person whom I can save without comparable sacrifice, there are many thousands of other persons in the same unfortunate position whom I can also save. But my morally relevant relations to each one of these persons are exactly the same as my morally relevant relations to each of the others. So it would be wrong to grant the right to my help to one of these persons and yet deny this right to any of the others. Therefore, if I am obligated to save any particular person whom I can help, I am obligated to save all such persons. But as we have seen, I am not obligated to save all of the starving persons whom I am in a position to save, since I cannot do so. Thus there is no particular starving person whom I am obligated to save, and again, (1) and (3)—which imply the contrary—are both false. Moreover, I take it that most members of affluent societies do not have the resources to save all of those starving persons whom they are in a position to save. Thus, most members of affluent societies are under no obligation to save any particular starv-

ing person. Hence (2) is also false. It seems, then, that neither Singer nor Aiken has said anything which would help anyone to answer the question “What ought I to do about world hunger?”

In [2], John Arthur has also argued that Singer’s principle (1) is false, but on the grounds that (1) unreasonably requires the affluent to sacrifice for the starving to such an extent that they would no longer be able to fulfill their own life-plans. Arthur proposes that the correct principle which supports our duties to the starving is not (1) but rather the weaker principle

- (4) 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,

where, he suggests, a standard of “substantial significance” would be that “if the lack of *x* would not affect the long-term happiness of a person, then *x* is of no substantial significance.” (p. 47)

But (4) is clearly false, for the same reason that (1), (2) and (3) are. It is reasonable to suppose that I could prevent the impending death of any starving person by giving him ten dollars’ worth of food, and this would of course not be a sacrifice on my part of any substantial significance. But again, there is no particular starving person to whom I am obligated to give ten dollars’ worth of food, for if there were, I would be obligated to give ten dollars’ worth of food to *every* starving person, and I of course do not have such an obligation.

I suggest that Singer, Aiken, and Arthur have all been misled by the life-saving model. In a situation in which there is one and only one person drowning in a pond, and there is one and only one person standing on the pond’s bank who can without danger to himself save the drowning person, then clearly the person on the bank is obligated to save the person who is drowning. But the relationship between each starving person and each member of an affluent society who can help that starving person is seriously disanalogous to that which exists in the life-saving case between the drowning person and the one who can save him. For unfortunately, there is not just one, but there are many thousands of starving persons each of whom any member of an affluent society is in a position to save. The actual situation regarding world hunger is thus more closely analogous to one in which a good-sized ship with several hundred persons on board is sinking, and I am close by in my rowboat which holds eleven persons at most. I can save only ten persons of the hundreds who are drowning, and so (contrary to the principles (1) and (4)) it is clear that there is no particular drowning person whom I am obligated to save.

But in this case, even though there is no particular drowning person whom I am obligated to save, it is obvious that I am at least obligated to save as many of the drowning as I can. Perhaps, then, if we could find the principle by virtue of which I have the latter obligation, we would also have found a correct principle which would tell us what we ought to do about world hunger, namely, *save as many of the starving as we can*.

Though it is difficult to formulate the principle in question,³ the following seems to be a promising candidate:

- (5) Let S be a set of actions such that S contains all and only those actions open to an individual agent x which
- (i) can be done by x without x's thereby sacrificing anything of substantial moral significance, and
 - (ii) have consequences at least as good as those of every other alternative action open to x which satisfies (i),

then, if a given action A by x is contained in every member of S, then x ought morally to do A.

(By saying that an action A is "contained" in an action B, I mean that the agent of A cannot perform B without also performing A during the time-interval of B.)

(5) has the virtue of having the correct consequences in the sinking-ship case. In this case, the most good I can do (without sacrificing anything of substantial moral significance) is to save ten drowning persons, but there is no particular group of ten which it would be better for me to save than any other. So there are several alternative actions which I can perform in this case, each of which has optimal value. Now there is no particular person such that my action of saving this person is contained in all of these optimal actions. Thus (5) does not imply that I ought to save any particular drowning person. However, each of the optimal actions I can perform is a case of my saving ten persons, and so each such action contains my action of *saving ten persons*. Thus (5) does imply (together with the facts in this case) that I ought morally to save ten of the persons who are drowning.

It seems to me quite likely that the principle (5) better captures the intuitions of those who defend the view that we have duties of benevolence to the starving than either (1), (3) or (4). For it seems to me that such thinkers as Singer, Aiken and Arthur are not really as concerned to show that we have benevolence-duties toward particular starving persons, as they are concerned to show that we are obligated to provide as much help to the starving as we can (without sacrificing anything of

substantial moral significance). But can (5) be used to show this? Does the sinking-ship model really provide a more effective guide for determining our obligations to the starving than does the life-saving model?

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to consider what would have to be true in order for (5) to yield an obligation on the part of an individual to help the starving. Briefly, what would have to be true is this: when an individual has an opportunity to increase the amount of good in the world, or decrease the amount of evil, and he can do so without violating some other overriding obligation or substantially decreasing his own long-term happiness, then *the most good* he can accomplish would be brought about in part by his giving at least some aid to those who are in danger of death by starvation. Perhaps some would find it self-evident that many, perhaps most, members of affluent societies satisfy this condition. But I do not find it self-evident at all.

For suppose I have resources which I can use to decrease the amount of human suffering in the world, and I can do so without substantial sacrifice. Clearly, the forms of human suffering are so multifarious, that there are many different ways in which I can effectively use my resources. A short list, for instance, would include such uses as the following: I could use my resources to lobby for legislation which would improve the economic and social conditions of underprivileged members of my own society; I could use them to contribute to many different research foundations which are attempting to find the cures for various debilitating or deadly diseases, both physical and mental; I could use my time or personal skills to aid the mental and physical conditions of the abandoned elderly, of the orphaned, the alcoholic, the drug-addicted, the mentally ill. An accurate list of this sort would be very long indeed; the reader can easily add items to those I've mentioned.

Of course, *one* item which also belongs on my list is: I could use my resources to contribute to famine relief. But this fact is not in question. The question is, *Must* I so use all or a part of my resources? Would I be doing something morally wrong, if I were to contribute all of my resources to the decrease of some other form of human suffering besides world hunger? Those such as Singer, Aiken and Arthur who would argue on the basis of an individual benevolence principle such as (5) that we have obligations to the starving, would have to assert that, for many of us at least, the answer to these questions is Yes. But it seems to me both implausible and unseemly 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 wrong doing.

Thus I think that there is no plausible way in which (5) may be used to support the claim that individual members of affluent societies are severally obligated to provide aid to the starving of the world. Like the life-saving model, the sinking-ship model does not reflect the actual situation regarding world hunger. The actual situation is instead best reflected by what we might call “the natural-disaster” model. For instance, when a flood strikes a community, there are many jobs which need to be done: rescue squads need to be dispatched to save those in danger of drowning; doctors and nurses are needed to treat injuries and to inoculate against disease; housing, food and clothing must be supplied to the homeless survivors; engineers and laborers are needed to hold back the still rising waters; and so on. To claim that all or most of those who can spare the resources are obligated to save the starving is like claiming that all or most of those who can help when a flood strikes are obligated to save the drowning. Both claims are simply false, because each person can fulfill his benevolence-obligations in different alternative ways; there is thus no good reason to think that the members of any particular subclass of those in need have any special rights against particular individuals who are in a position to help them.

I believe that (5)—or perhaps a more refined principle similar to (5)—is the most plausible source of individuals’ duties of benevolence. But (5) does not support the view that individual members of affluent societies have obligations to help the starving of the world. Thus we may conclude, contrary to what is commonly supposed, that *no* individual-benevolence principle supports the claim that individual members of affluent societies are obligated to help the starving.

But this does not I think imply that the starving are owed nothing. For it is consistent with what we’ve said so far that certain societies or nations, and perhaps humanity as a whole, are obligated to improve the lot of the starving. Let us now consider whether, and if so why, this might be the case.

II. HUMANITY’S OBLIGATIONS TO THE STARVING

It will be useful at this point to reexamine the contention that people who are in danger of death due to starvation have a right to be saved. Against whom would such people have this right, if they had it? Aiken claims that they have it against “any and all” who are in a position to save them. But we have seen that this claim is false. Thus either no one has a right to be saved from starvation, or some do have such a right, but not against any and all who can save them. But how could a starving person have a right to be saved, and yet not have this right against any and all who can save him? The answer is that such a person might have a right to be saved against a *group* which could save him: a starving

person might have a right to *our* help, a right to be saved by *us*, without having a right to be saved by *each* of us who can save him.⁴

For instance, suppose that there are three people who are drowning in the surf at the same time, and there are just two people together on the beach, each of whom sees that the three are drowning and hears their cries for help. Each of the two on the beach is capable, with only minimal risk to himself, of swimming out and saving any one, but no more than one, of the drowning persons. Do any of the three drowning persons have a right to be saved against either one of the two persons on the beach? Not necessarily. If we suppose that the value of the consequences of any one of the drowning persons' being saved is the same as the value of the consequences of any one of the others' being saved, then there is no particular one of the three whom either of the two on the beach is required to save solely through his own efforts. At most, the circumstances as so far described would require only that each of the two on the beach is obligated to save at least one of the three who are drowning. So none of the three drowning persons has a right to be saved against either of the two who can save him.

However, each of the three drowning persons might nevertheless have a right to be saved against the *group* consisting of the two persons on the beach. For suppose there is a rowboat tied nearby which requires two persons for its operation, and that if the two on the beach coordinate their efforts, all three of the drowning persons can be saved with relative ease. In this case, it seems clear, the group of two on the beach is obligated to row out and save each of the three drowning persons, and so each of the three has a right to be saved by the group of two.⁵ Now it is still true that none of the three drowning persons has a right to be saved against either one of the two who can save him. For it is still true that neither of these two is capable of *by himself* saving more than one of the drowning persons. But nevertheless, each of the three drowning persons does have a right to be saved against the group which consists of the two on the beach.

In general, then, it seems that to say that an individual has a right to be treated in a certain way is to say that the individual has a right to be treated in that way against some individual or *group of individuals*. And of course to have a right to be treated in a certain way against a group is not necessarily the same as having the right to be treated in that way against each member of the group. In the case of starvation, then, we have

- (6) An individual *x* has a right to be saved from starvation if and only if there is some group or individual *g* such that *x* has a right against *g* that *g* save *x* from starvation.

Further, it seems to me, the claim that an individual x has a right against g that g treat him in a certain way is equivalent to the claim that g is obligated to treat x in this way. So (6) is equivalent to

- (7) An individual x has a right to be saved from starvation if and only if there is some group or individual g such that g is obligated to save x from starvation.⁶

Examples like that of the group of two which is obligated to save the three drowning persons make it obvious that groups sometimes have obligations to come to the aid of persons in need of help. The source of such obligations would seem to be a benevolence-principle of a sort similar to the individual-benevolence-principle (5) proposed earlier. This suggests that there is a single benevolence-principle which applies to both individuals and groups, and that (5) is only a special case of this more general principle. If (5) is a correct principle for individuals, then its proper generalization would be:

- (8) Let S be a set of courses or sequences of actions such that S contains all and only those sequences open to an individual or group g which
- (i) can be done by g without g 's thereby sacrificing anything of substantial moral significance, and
 - (ii) have consequences at least as good as those of every other alternative sequence open to g which satisfies (1),

then, if a given sequence of actions A is contained in every member of S , then g ought morally to do A .⁷

Now let us consider the possible consequences of (8) regarding group-obligations to the starving. First, does (8) prove effective as a source of individual persons' rights to be saved from starvation? In order for it to do so, it must yield obligations on the part of groups to save certain individuals from starvation. And for a group to be obligated on the basis of (8) to save an individual from starvation, the group's saving that individual must be contained in all the optimal courses of action open to that group which the group can perform without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance. There are two sorts of cases which need to be considered: first, when the group in question can save some but not all of those who suffer from starvation; and second, when the group is capable of saving all such people.

Suppose we have a group g of the first sort which is capable of saving a fairly large proper subset of the starving. Would there be any person whom g is obligated to save from starvation? In order for (8) to justify such a claim, there would have to be at least one person x such that all of g 's optimal courses of action involve the saving of some subset of the starving which contains x . Of course, there *could* be such a person. But it seems to me that it is unlikely that there *would* be such a person. For I should think that typically a group which is capable of saving only some of the starving could fulfill its benevolence-obligations by saving any one of many alternative subsets of the starving, where there is no single individual that is a common member of all of these subsets.

It might be replied that, for any group g that can save a subset of the starving, it is very likely that there is some subset of the starving such that g can save it and the consequences of g 's doing so would be better than those of g 's saving any other subset that it can save. (On the grounds that the value of the consequences would not be *exactly* the same for any two subsets.) But then, doesn't this fact together with the principle (8) imply that such a group would be obligated to save each member of some given subset of the starving? I myself find it hard to judge how likely it is, for any arbitrary group g , that there is exactly one subset of the starving the saving of which by g would have better consequences than g 's saving any other. But even if, for some g , there is such a subset, it does not follow from (8) that g is obligated to save this subset, or even any member of this subset. For let S be such a subset that g can save. In order for g to be obligated by (9) to save S , g 's saving S must be contained in *all* of g 's optimal courses of action. But even if g 's saving S is contained in *one* of g 's optimal courses of action (an assumption that is by no means certain), it is I think unlikely that g 's saving S would be contained in *all* of g 's optimal courses of action. For let S' be any subset of S which contains slightly fewer members than S . Surely, g could fulfill its obligations by saving S' instead of S , and making up for the difference between S and S' through a slightly greater alleviation of some other form of human suffering. In this case, there would be no member of S who has a right to be saved against g . So again, it seems that, at least in typical cases, a group which is capable of saving only some of the starving could act in accordance with (8) by saving any one of many alternative subsets of the starving, where there is no individual who is a member of all these subsets.

If we consider the possibility that some group is capable of saving *all* of the starving, the situation remains essentially unchanged. For instance, suppose some affluent nation N is capable of saving all of the starving. Would it then be part of all of N 's optimal courses of action that it save all of the starving? Probably not. For N could always share

part of the expense of famine relief with other nations, and spend its unused resources on other responsibilities or good works. (It is of course likely that N *would* share this expense, since it is in fact shared by many different nations.) In this case, an optimal amount of good would be produced by N's pursuing a course of action in which N does not save all the starving, and so N is not obligated to save all the starving. But in this case, there would also probably be no particular set of starving persons which N is obligated to save, and so no particular starving person would have a right to be saved against N.

Finally, we need to consider the possibility that humanity as a whole is capable of saving all the starving. Would humanity's doing this be contained in all of its optimal courses of action? If so, then by (8) every starving person has a right against humanity to be saved from starvation. However, it seems doubtful that this is so. Even if one of humanity's optimal courses of action would result in the salvation of all starving persons, there would no doubt be many other equally valuable courses of action which would not save quite all the starving but which would make up for this lack by slightly greater alleviations of some other forms of human suffering. So again, it is unlikely that there would be any particular starving person the saving of whom would be contained in all of humanity's optimal courses of action.

I think that we may fairly conclude from the preceding discussion, together with that of part I, that benevolence principles such as (5) and (8) are not very effective sources of individual rights to be saved from starvation.

On the other hand, it seems certain that while (8) does not effectively yield obligations on the part of groups to save particular starving persons, (8) nevertheless does yield general obligations on the part of affluent nations, and perhaps on the part of nations that are not affluent, to come to the aid of persons who are suffering from hunger. For needless to say, starvation is probably the most widespread and terrible form of suffering and loss inflicted upon humanity. It is therefore extremely unlikely that by following a course of action which includes no aid to the starving, any affluent nation would be bringing about the best consequences that it is capable of bringing about. Surely some course of action which does include such aid would be better. Moreover, there can be no doubt whatever that humanity as a whole is obligated on grounds of benevolence to come to the aid of the starving. Certainly, alleviation of world hunger must be a part of any optimally beneficent plan which is undertaken by humanity now or in the future. This is doubtless true even though, as we've seen, it is unlikely that there are any particular starving persons who have a right to be saved as a result of the general alleviation of world hunger.

Why is it that (8) yields obligations on the part of groups to help the starving, while (5) does not yield similar obligations on the part of individuals? The reason is that the resources available to groups for the relief of human suffering are astronomically greater than the resources available to any particular person. As we saw earlier, in the case of a natural disaster like a flood, particular persons who can help are not obligated to use their resources to the benefit of any particular subclass of those in need, say, those who are in danger of drowning. But the *community* of those in a position to help when a flood strikes is obligated to do *all* of the jobs which need to be done, because taken as a whole the group *can* do these things.

Similarly, in the case of world hunger, I may not be morally required to use my resources to aid the starving, since I can use these resources in other equally beneficial ways. But I belong to groups, such as humanity as a whole, to which this argument does not apply. For it is reasonable to believe that humanity as a whole has the resources to substantially decrease *many* different forms of human suffering and, among these, starvation is perhaps the most pronounced.

III. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN GROUPS' AND INDIVIDUALS' OBLIGATIONS

We have seen that no benevolence-principle gives any clear or direct answer to each person's question "What ought *I* to do about world hunger?" The best one can do is to use such a principle to determine what the groups to which he belongs ought to do about world hunger, and then go on to determine what he ought to do as a member of such a group.

But before one can perform this latter task, one must answer a basic question concerning the nature of group obligation, namely, what is the connection between the obligations possessed by a group and those of its members? Unfortunately, there is no obvious answer to this question. Typically, the best course of action which a group may follow does not depend for its fulfillment upon the particular members of the group each acting in some particular prescribed way. For instance, in a life-saving case in which it is necessary that four persons row a boat out to a drowning person while a fifth throws him a life-preserver, it may not matter *who* rows or *who* does the throwing. In a case like this, it is not obvious that there are *any* particular actions which the members of the group are obligated to perform, just given that the group has its particular obligation.

Even when a group's obligation can only be fulfilled by each of its members acting in some definite prescribed way, it does not follow from the group's having this obligation that each of its members is

obligated to act in the prescribed way. For instance, consider the following example described by Postow in [10]. Suppose that the best course of action which Fred and Mary can follow is one in which Fred weeds the garden while Mary waters it. So the group consisting of Fred and Mary ought to perform a course of action in which Fred weeds and Mary waters. But this is clearly consistent with its being true that Fred ought to water rather than weed. For if Mary is in fact going to weed come what may, and Fred cannot persuade her to water, it might be that what Fred ought to do under the circumstances is to do the watering himself while Mary weeds.

There is thus no obvious way, once we know what a group's obligations are, of reading off the resulting obligations of individual members of the group, or *vice versa*. One thing which I think we can definitely say is at least that if a group has an obligation to do an action, then every member of the group is obligated not to *block* the group's doing that action. But it is extremely difficult to say precisely what *positive* duties a person has by virtue of his being a member of a group which has a given obligation. Perhaps the most we can say is the following:

- (9) If a group *g* is obligated to perform an action or sequence of actions *A*, then:
- (i) every member of *g* is obligated not to prevent *g* from performing *A*, and
 - (ii) every member of *g* who has the capacity and opportunity to make a positive contribution toward establishing the result that *g* performs *A*, has a *prima facie* obligation to make such a contribution.⁸

Now (9) is a fairly weak principle. But I would like to suggest that (9) is *the strongest* principle for connecting groups' obligations with those of their members which is likely to prove defensible. For consider the stronger principle (9*) which is just like (9) except that according to (9*), if a group *g* is obligated to do *A*, then each member of *g* has an *absolute* obligation to positively contribute toward *g*'s doing *A*. Suppose that a society *g* is obligated to both give aid to the starving of the world as well as to the mentally ill members of *g*, and that a given member *m* of *g* is capable of contributing effectively either to *g*'s help of the starving or to *g*'s help of the mentally ill, but *m* cannot effectively do *both*. In this case, (9*) ascribes conflicting obligations to *m*, and so (9*) is incoherent. Moreover, (9*) may conflict with *m*'s own benevolence obligations. For suppose that *m*, due to his training and position, would be more effective in contributing to *g*'s aid of the mentally ill than he

would be in contributing to g's aid of the starving. Then clearly, it could be true on grounds of benevolence that, contrary to (9*), m ought to help the mentally ill and not the starving.

So the fact that a group has an obligation to secure a certain goal does not imply that those members of the group who can do so are absolutely obligated to help in the securing of that goal. Nevertheless, it would seem, the fact that a group has an obligation to secure a certain goal always at least provides each member of the group with *good grounds* for thinking himself obligated to help in the securing of that goal. Otherwise it seems impossible to explain why the members of groups are so often influenced to positive action by appeals to their groups' moral responsibilities. The plausibility of (9) lies in the fact that it explains this phenomenon while it also avoids the false consequences of the stronger principle (9*).

I have argued on the basis of the benevolence-principle (8) that affluent nations and humanity as a whole are obligated to alleviate world hunger. If I am right that (9) is true and that it is the strongest coherent principle linking groups' obligations to those of their members, then the only correct answer based on benevolence which can always be given to each person's question as to what he ought to do about world hunger is: You have a *prima facie* obligation to positively contribute toward your nation's, or humanity's, alleviating world hunger. I do not believe that there is any simple or obvious procedure by which each person can determine whether this *prima facie* obligation on his part is absolute, but I do not doubt that some of us do in fact have such an absolute obligation.⁹

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NOTES

¹Singer, [13], p. 24, explains that “By ‘without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance’, I mean without causing anything else comparably bad to happen, or doing something that is wrong in itself, or failing to promote some moral good, comparable in significance to the bad thing we can prevent.”

²I should note that Singer’s principle (1) *can* be understood so as not to have this implication. For we could understand that when I help one starving person but fail to help another, I have “sacrificed something of comparable moral importance” in helping the first, namely, my ability to help the second. I do not think that Singer meant his principle (1) this way (see footnote 1 above), but if he did, it is a mystery why he should have thought that (1) yields any obligations to the starving at all. For no matter which bad things (cases of starvation) I prevent, I thereby sacrifice my ability to prevent other equally bad things, and so on the present reading (1) would not imply that I ought to prevent anyone at all from starving.

³The problem of formulating the right benevolence principle in question is a special case of a general problem which has received considerable attention in recent years, namely, that of formulating a coherent version of act utilitarianism. I believe that this problem is not yet completely resolved. I also think that my principle (5) is not without its difficulties, though it is adequate for my purposes here. See the important papers on this subject by Bergström ([3], [4]), Castañeda ([6], [7]) and Aqvist ([14]). In my formulation of (5), I am indebted to Prawitz [11], p. 124.

⁴The concepts of group obligation and responsibility until recently have received only scant attention and are consequently not as yet well understood. A good beginning has been made by Virginia Held, in [9]. See also [8].

⁵Notice that we cannot eliminate the group’s obligation by supposing that it just reduces to each member of the group’s being obligated to *help* save the three who are drowning. For if one of the two on the beach refuses to do anything to help, the other is not obligated to help save the three (since he cannot do so). In this case, it is still intuitively correct to say that the group of two is obligated to save the three who are drowning, even though it is not true that each member of the group is obligated to help save the three.

⁶One might be led to doubt the left-to-right conditional in (7) on the following grounds. Suppose that A has promised B to save him from starvation on Friday, and then wantonly consumes the requisite food on Thursday. It seems reasonable to say that B still has a right against A to be saved from starvation on Friday, even though A can no longer save him and hence is no longer obligated to do so. But this consideration should not I think lead us to doubt the truth of (7). For the intuition that B still has a right to be saved by A is precisely the same intuition that many would express by saying that A is still under an obligation to save B, even though he can no longer do so. (Indeed, I have often heard this kind of case adduced as evidence against the principle that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’.) So the real issue raised by this example does not concern the truth of (7). Rather, the real issue concerns the circumstances, if any, under which obligations and their corresponding rights can be cancelled. In my view, any solution to this problem regarding obligations will apply equally well to the same problem regarding rights, and so the truth-value of (7) will not be affected by the solution.

⁷In [10] B. G. Postow has recently argued, correctly I think, that act utilitarianism should be generalized to apply to both groups and individuals. (8) is similar in spirit to the generalization proposed by Postow.

⁸Compare Brandt [5], p. 438.

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