

## Hunger, Duty, and Ecology: On What We Owe Starving Humans

MYLAN ENGEL, JR.

*Mylan Engel, Jr., is a professor of philosophy at Northern Illinois University. His primary areas of interest include epistemology, philosophy of religion, and practical ethics. His current research centers on the following issues: personal and doxastic justification in epistemology; epistemic contextualism, skepticism, and closure; rational belief in the absence of reasons; human obligations toward nonhuman animals; and our duties to those living in absolute poverty. Engel has provided the following abstract of his article.*

*"An argument is advanced for the moral obligatoriness of (O<sub>1</sub>) supporting famine relief organizations through financial contributions and (O<sub>2</sub>) refraining from squandering food in situations of food scarcity. Unlike other ethical arguments for the obligation to assist the world's absolutely poor, my argument is not predicated on any highly contentious ethical theory which you can reject. Rather, it is predicated on your own beliefs. The argument shows that the things you currently believe already commit you to the obligatoriness of helping to reduce malnutrition and famine-related diseases by sending a nominal percentage of your income to famine-relief organizations and by not squandering food that could be fed to them. Being consistent with your own beliefs implies that to do any less is to be profoundly immoral."*

### HUNGER, DUTY, AND ECOLOGY: ON WHAT WE OWE STARVING HUMANS

You probably remember many of the tragic events of September 11, 2001. Nineteen terrorists hijacked four commercial airliners, crashing two of them into the World Trade Center towers, one into the Pentagon, and one in a field in Pennsylvania. Approximately 3,200 innocent individuals died needlessly. People around the world stared at their

television sets in horror and disbelief as the news media aired clips of the attack 'round the clock. The tragedy immediately roused President Bush to declare "war on terrorism." Volunteers from all across America traveled to New York at their own expense to aid in the rescue and clean-up efforts. Charitable contributions poured into the American Red Cross, which in turn wrote checks totaling \$143.4 million in emergency aid (averaging \$45,837 per family). The U.S. government put together a \$5 billion relief package that will provide

MYLAN ENGEL, JR. • HUNGER, DUTY, AND ECOLOGY: ON WHAT WE OWE STARVING HUMANS

\$1.6 million to each of the victim's families. The United States has spent billions more on its military efforts to root out Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda terrorist network. As the dust from the 9/11 attacks has finally settled, it is safe to say that Americans are now taking terrorism seriously.

Here are some of the tragic events that took place on 9/11 that you probably don't recall. On that infamous day, more than 33,000 innocent children under the age of five died *senseless, needless deaths*—18,000 died from malnutrition and another 15,300 died of untreated poverty-related diseases. It must be stressed that almost all of these deaths were *unnecessary*. They could have *easily been prevented*. The United States alone grows enough grain and soybeans to feed the world's human population several times over. Given this overabundance of food, the lives of those children who starved to death on 9/11 could have easily been saved, had we only diverted a relatively modest portion of this food to them. As for the disease-related deaths, 19% of the 33,000 children who lost their lives on 9/11 died from the dehydrating effects of chronic diarrhea. Almost all of these 6,350 diarrheal dehydration deaths could have been prevented by administering each child a single packet of oral rehydration salts (cost per packet: 15 cents). Another 19% of these children died from acute respiratory infections. Most of them could have been saved with a course of antibiotics (cost: 25 cents). Most of the 2,300 children who died from measles could have been saved with vitamin A therapy (cost per capsule: less than 10 cents). What makes the deaths of these children particularly tragic is that virtually all of them were readily preventable. They occurred only because otherwise good people did nothing to prevent them.

Despite the fact that the number of innocent children who died needlessly on 9/11 was ten times greater than the number of innocent people who lost their lives in the 9/11 terrorist attack, compassionate conservative President Bush did not declare war on hunger or on poverty. The U.S. government did not immediately institute a multibillion dollar relief package for the world's absolutely poor. People did not make out generous checks to

famine-relief organizations. The media did not so much as mention the tragedy of so many innocent young lives lost. And, as if 9/11 wasn't enough for us to deal with, on 9/12 another 33,000 innocent children under the age of five died unnecessarily, and another 33,000 on 9/13. In the 22 months that have transpired since the 9/11 tragedy, more than 22 million innocent children under the age of five have died needlessly. By any objective measure, the tragedy of the 9/11 attack pales in comparison with the tragedy of world hunger and famine-related disease. Each year the latter claims 3,800 times more innocent lives than the 9/11 attack. Despite the magnitude of the tragedy of global hunger and childhood malnutrition, the overwhelming majority of affluent and moderately affluent people, including most philosophers, send no money to famine-relief organizations. Of the 4 million people who receive solicitations from UNICEF each year, less than 1% donate anything at all. For most of us, world hunger doesn't even register a blip on our moral radar screens, much less present itself as a serious moral problem requiring action on our part.

My aim in the present paper is an ambitious one. I hope to convince you (and others) to *take hunger seriously*. How? By showing you that your beliefs already commit you to the view that global hunger and *absolute poverty*<sup>1</sup> impose serious moral obligations on moderately affluent people. Starting with your beliefs as premises, I shall argue that affluent and moderately affluent people, like you and me, are morally obligated:

(O<sub>1</sub>) to provide modest financial support for famine-relief organizations and/or other humanitarian organizations working to reduce the amount of unnecessary pain, suffering, and death in the world, and

(O<sub>2</sub>) to refrain from squandering food that could be fed to the world's absolutely poor.

### 1. PRELIMINARIES

affluent people who have the financial means to prevent some innocent children from starving to death to do nothing to reduce the number of children suffering from starvation? Are moderately affluent people morally obligated to send money to famine-relief organizations to help reduce world hunger and absolute poverty? If so, what is the extent of their obligation—i.e., just how much money must they send to these humanitarian organizations if they are to avoid being immoral?

These questions took center stage in the 1970s when a spate of philosophers offered arguments defending the view that affluent and moderately affluent people are morally required to provide financial support to organizations working to alleviate hunger, malnutrition, and absolute poverty around the world. Arguments from practically every theoretical perspective in normative ethics (except for libertarianism, which will be discussed later) were advanced: utilitarian arguments, Kantian arguments, human rights-based arguments, and ideal contractarian arguments. Working backwards, Jan Narveson (1977) rejects the libertarian “Nobody needs to help anybody” stance as unreasonable and, using a Rawlsian approach, he tentatively defends the view that one is free to acquire more property than one’s neighbor, but only if one is “willing to contribute a certain amount of one’s wealth to those in undeserved misfortune, once one gets beyond a certain minimal amount—a fraction which perhaps increases as one gets more and more.” William Aiken (1977) argues that the moral right to be saved from starvation derives from the more general moral right to be saved from preventable death due to deprivation and that this latter right generates a stringent corresponding moral obligation on the part of those in a position to prevent such deaths. As Aiken puts it:

Until it is true that I cannot help another without putting myself in an equivalent position of need (that is, dying of deprivation), I have a *prima facie* obligation to honor others’ right to be saved from preventable death due to deprivation.<sup>2</sup>

The Kantian argument is predicated on Kant’s claim that we have an imperfect duty to help those in dire need. As I interpret Kant, the duty is imperfect, since (i) there is no specific person to whom we owe it; (ii) since we owe it to persons generally and because we cannot possibly help *every* person in dire need, we are free to fulfill the duty in various ways as various opportunities to help present themselves; and (iii) the duty is a general duty that is never completely satisfied—i.e., no matter how many people in dire need we help, we are still obligated to help other people in dire need when we can do so. It is not a duty that we should fulfill *only* when some especially salient case presents itself. It is a duty that we should fulfill *whenever* we can, provided that doing so won’t prevent us from our doing any of our other overriding duties. Most of us living in affluent nations have relatively few nearby opportunities to help people in dire need (because most of the people we regularly encounter are not in dire need). But there are millions of people elsewhere who are in dire need (of food, medicine, etc.), some of whom we can help by sending money to organizations like OXFAM, and so, on Kantian grounds, we ought to send money to these organizations whenever doing so will not prevent us from carrying out any of our other duties. Emphasizing consequentialist reasoning, Peter Unger (1996) argues that our *primary basic moral values* entail the following Pretty Demanding Dictate:

(P<sub>1</sub>) On pain of living a life that’s seriously immoral, a typical well-off person, like you and me, must give away most of her financially valuable assets, and much of her income, directing the funds to lessen efficiently the serious suffering of others.

In his seminal article “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” Peter Singer (1972) offers a utilitarian argument to the effect that we ought to send famine-relief organizations “as much money as possible, that is, at least up to the point at which by giving more one would begin to cause serious suffering for oneself and one’s dependents—perhaps

even beyond this point to the point of marginal utility.” Singer begins his argument with the following much-discussed example:

*The Pond:* Suppose that on my way to give a lecture I notice that a small child has fallen in [a pond] and is in danger of drowning. Would anyone deny that I ought to wade in and pull the child out? This will mean getting my clothes muddy and either canceling my lecture or delaying it until I can find something dry to change into, but compared with the avoidable death of the child this is insignificant.

The Pond example is supposed to motivate the following principle:

(P<sub>2</sub>) If it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, we ought to do it.<sup>3</sup>

Singer takes (P<sub>2</sub>) to be uncontroversial and thinks it explains why we ought to pull the child from the pond. Given (P<sub>2</sub>), Singer reasons as follows: Since absolute poverty is very bad, we ought to prevent as much absolute poverty as we can, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance. Since most of the material possessions with which we surround ourselves pale in significance compared to an innocent child’s life, we ought to forego such luxuries and save children instead.

These arguments taken together present us with a certain sort of puzzle. First, each of these arguments is initially quite compelling, at least if one accepts the normative framework within which the argument is couched. For example, it seems that any hedonistic or preference act-utilitarian is committed to Singer’s principle (P<sub>2</sub>), regardless whether The Pond justifies (P<sub>2</sub>). Because the other premises in Singer’s argument are uncontroversial, it looks as if any hedonistic or preference act-utilitarian must accept Singer’s robust conclusion. In short, these arguments provide strong utilitarian, Kantian, rights-based, and contractarian reasons for thinking that we have a moral duty to assist those in absolute poverty.

Second, utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, human rights-based ethics, and contractarianism are among the most widely accepted theories in normative ethics. Most philosophers working in ethics today claim to accept some version of one of these theories. Third, with the possible exception of Narveson’s view, all of the arguments just considered draw highly demanding conclusions. These arguments (especially Singer’s, Unger’s, and Aiken’s) conclude that we are morally obligated to send sizeable portions of our wealth and income to famine-relief organizations like CARE and that we should continue doing so up to the point where further contributions would reduce us to the same level of need as those we are trying to help. Fourth, few people, philosophers included, contribute anything to CARE, OXFAM, or UNICEF, and almost no people contribute sizeable portions of their income to these organizations, even after they have heard the arguments. What has gone wrong?

Perhaps such highly demanding views are psychologically overwhelming and hence counterproductive. Shelly Kagan considers such an objection. As he puts it:

[I]f morality demands too much . . . then when people fall short of its requirements (as doubtless they will do) they will say to themselves that they might as well obey none of morality’s requirements at all. Given this all-or-nothing attitude, it is important that morality’s requirements not be too severe—for were they severe morality would fall into wide neglect.

Call this objection *Too Much*. According to *Too Much*, what has gone wrong is that the overly demanding moral principles advocated by Singer, Unger, and Aiken have generated a counterproductive kind of futility thinking: “If I can’t live up to the ideal, I shouldn’t even try to approximate it.” But *Too Much* is a psychological thesis. Even if true, it has no bearing on what our *actual* moral duties are. It is only concerned with what moral duties and principles we should publicly espouse. In short, *Too Much* can be restated as follows: “There may be good consequentialist reasons for

understanding the extent of people's *actual* moral obligations, namely, that by doing so people will fulfill more of their *actual* obligations than they otherwise would have." Such an observation tells us nothing about what our *actual* duties are nor does it do anything to *reduce* or *minimize* those actual duties. Plus, Too Much is probably false. It is highly doubtful that people engage in the sort of all-or-nothing thinking that Too Much predicts, for as Kagan observes:

Many people disobey the speed limit; few consequently feel free to run down pedestrians. I see no reason why we couldn't teach people to think, "Well, I'm not doing all I should—but only a *monster* would fail to do at least..."

If all-or-nothing futility thinking isn't to blame, then our puzzle remains. Why have such seemingly compelling arguments been so ineffective in evoking behavioral change? I think the answer is more straightforward than Too Much. Moral arguments often tell people that they ought to do things they don't want to do. Typically, when people are presented with an argument telling them that they ought to do *X*—where *X* is something they would rather not do—they look for reasons to reject that argument. One of the most common reasons that I have heard philosophers give for rejecting the arguments of Singer and company runs roughly as follows:

Singer's preference utilitarianism is irremediably flawed, as are Kant's ethics, Aiken's theory of human rights, and Rawlsean contractarianism. The literature is peppered with devastating objections to these views. Because all of the aforementioned arguments are predicated on flawed ethical theories, all these arguments are also flawed. Until someone can provide me with clear moral reasons grounded in a true moral theory for sending large portions of my income to famine-relief organizations, I will continue to spend my money on what I please.

Such a self-serving reply is both disingenuous and sophistical. It is disingenuous because, as noted earlier, utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, human rights-based ethics, and contractarianism are among the most widely accepted theories in normative ethics. In other contexts, philosophers typically embrace one of these four theoretical approaches to ethics. It is sophistical because a similar reply can be used to "justify" or rationalize virtually any behavior. Because no moral theory to date is immune to objection, one could, for example, "justify" rape on the grounds that all of the arguments against rape are predicated on flawed ethical theories.

The speciousness of such a "justification" of rape is obvious. No one who seriously considers the brutality of rape can think that it is somehow justified/permisssible *simply because* all current ethical theories are flawed. But such specious reasoning is often used to "justify" allowing millions of innocent children to starve to death each year. I aim to block this spurious reply by providing an argument for the moral obligatoriness of  $(O_1)$  and  $(O_2)$ , which does not rest on any particular, highly contentious ethical theory. Rather, it rests on beliefs you already hold.<sup>4</sup>

One caveat before we begin. Ethical arguments are often context-dependent, in that they presuppose a specific audience in a certain set of circumstances. Recognizing what that intended audience and context are can prevent confusions about the scope of the ethical claim being made. My argument is context-dependent in precisely this way. It is not aimed at those relatively few people in developed nations who are so impoverished that they couldn't contribute to famine relief without extreme sacrifice. Rather, it is directed at people like you who are relatively well-off and who could easily contribute to famine relief with minimal sacrifice. I intend to show that your beliefs commit you to the view that it is morally wrong not to support famine-relief organizations (or other organizations working to reduce unnecessary suffering) for anyone who is in the circumstances in which you typically find yourself and *a fortiori* that it is morally wrong for you not to support such organizations. Enough by way of preamble, on to your beliefs.

## 2. THE THINGS YOU BELIEVE

The beliefs attributed to you herein would normally be considered noncontentious. In most contexts, we would take someone who didn't hold these beliefs to be either morally defective or irrational. Of course, in most contexts, people aren't being asked to part with their hard-earned cash. Still, even with that two-week luxury cruise in the Bahamas on the line, you will, I think, readily admit to believing the following propositions:

- (B<sub>1</sub>) Other things being equal, a world with less (more) pain and suffering is better (worse) than a world with more (less) pain and suffering.
- (B<sub>2</sub>) A world with less (more) unnecessary suffering is better (worse) than a world with more (less) unnecessary suffering.<sup>5</sup>

For those who have doubts as to whether or not they really do believe these two propositions, compare our world  $\alpha$  as it actually is—where millions of innocent children suffer slow painful deaths from starvation each year—with possible world  $W_1$ , where  $W_1$  is like our world in all respects except for two, namely, in  $W_1$  every child has sufficient food to eat and every country has instituted effective population measures that have reduced human population to sustainable levels.  $W_1$  is clearly a better world than  $\alpha$ , and you know that it is. After all, unnecessary suffering is intrinsically bad and  $\alpha$  contains vastly more unnecessary suffering than  $W_1$ .

Unnecessary suffering isn't the only thing you disvalue, as is evidenced by your belief:

- (B<sub>3</sub>) A world with fewer (more) unnecessary childhood deaths is better (worse) than a world with more (fewer) unnecessary childhood deaths.

Because you believe (B<sub>3</sub>) and also believe that unnecessary suffering is intrinsically bad, you no doubt believe both:

- (B<sub>4</sub>) It is bad when an innocent child under the age of 5 dies instantly in an automobile accident, and

- (B<sub>5</sub>) It is even worse when an innocent child under the age of 5 suffers a slow painful death from starvation.

These beliefs together commit you to the belief:

- (B<sub>6</sub>) Other things being equal, the world would be: (i) better if there were fewer children starving to death, (ii) much better if there were no children starving to death, and (iii) worse if there were more children starving to death.

Having reflected upon Singer's Pond, you surely believe:

- (B<sub>7</sub>) It is wrong to let an innocent child under age 5 drown when one can easily save that child with no risk and with minimal cost to oneself.

The fact that you accept (B<sub>7</sub>) demonstrates that you believe that there are at least some positive duties—i.e., duties to benefit others. So, you probably believe:

- (B<sub>8</sub>) We ought to take steps to make the world a better place, especially those steps that require little effort and minimal sacrifice on our part.

But even if you reject (B<sub>8</sub>) on the grounds that we have no positive duties (or very limited positive duties), you still think there are negative duties to do no harm, and so you believe:

- (B<sub>8</sub>) One ought to avoid making the world a worse place, at least whenever one can do so with minimal effort and negligible sacrifice.

You also believe:

- (B<sub>9</sub>) A morally good person will take steps to make the world a better place and even stronger steps to avoid making the world a worse place, and

- (B<sub>10</sub>) Even a "minimally decent person"<sup>6</sup> would take steps to help reduce the amount of unnecessary pain, suffering, and death in the world if s/he could do so with little effort on her/his part.

You also have beliefs about the sort of person you are. You believe one of the following propositions when the reflexive pronoun is indexed to yourself:

- (B<sub>11</sub>) I am a morally good person; or
- (B<sub>12</sub>) I am at least a minimally decent person.

You also believe of yourself:

- (B<sub>13</sub>) I am the sort of person who certainly would take steps to help reduce the amount of unnecessary pain, suffering, and death in the world *if I could do so with little effort on my part*, and

- (B<sub>14</sub>) I am an intellectually honest individual.

Finally, like most people, you believe:

- (B<sub>15</sub>) It is wrong to kill an innocent person unjustly.

And so you believe:

- (B<sub>16</sub>) It is wrong to kill innocent children between the ages of 2 and 5 as a means of population control, when equally effective nonlethal means of population control are readily available.

Even where *unjust killing* is not involved, you believe:

- (B<sub>17</sub>) Other things being equal, it is better when a person lives out her natural lifespan than when she dies prematurely.

Because you believe (B<sub>7</sub>), (B<sub>8</sub>), (B<sub>10</sub>), and (B<sub>17</sub>), presumably you also believe:

- (B<sub>18</sub>) Other things being equal, it is wrong to let an innocent person die *when one can prevent that death with minimal effort and negligible sacrifice*.

Because (B<sub>18</sub>) is completely general in its application, it commits you to the following belief as well:

- (B<sub>19</sub>) Other things being equal, it is wrong to let an innocent person die as a means of population control *when one can prevent that death with minimal effort and negligible sacrifice* and when equally effective nonlethal means of population control are readily available.

### 3. WHY YOU ARE COMMITTED TO THE MORAL OBLIGATORIENESS OF (O<sub>1</sub>)

The burden of the present section is to show that your beliefs (B<sub>1</sub>)–(B<sub>19</sub>) already commit you to obligation (O<sub>1</sub>). Using different subsets of [(B<sub>1</sub>), (B<sub>2</sub>), ..., (B<sub>19</sub>)], I will argue that anyone who believes (B<sub>1</sub>)–(B<sub>19</sub>) is committed to accepting two commonsensical, minimally demanding, normative principles and that these two principles entail that we are morally obligated (O<sub>1</sub>) to send a modest portion of our income to famine-relief organizations and/or other organizations working to reduce unnecessary suffering. Because each of these normative principles independently entails obligation (O<sub>1</sub>), you don't have to believe all of (B<sub>1</sub>)–(B<sub>19</sub>) for my argument to succeed. However, the more of these propositions you believe, the greater *your* commitment to the obligatoriness of (O<sub>1</sub>).

Upon closer inspection, the arguments for demanding dictates like those advocated by Unger and Singer break down. For example, Unger's argument for his Pretty Demanding Dictate is predicated on *The Weak Principle of Ethical Integrity*:

Other things being even nearly equal, if it's **all right** for you to impose losses on others with the result that there's a significant lessening in the serious losses suffered by others overall, then, if you're to avoid doing what's seriously wrong, *you can't fail to impose* much lesser losses on yourself, nor can you fail to accept such lesser losses, when the result's a much more significant lessening of such serious losses overall. (Unger's italics; bold emphasis mine)

But this principle is false. The fact that it would be *permissible* for you to impose certain losses on others does not entail that it is *obligatory* for you to impose lesser losses on yourself. It only entails that it would be *permissible* for you to impose such losses on yourself, and that has never been in doubt. What is at issue is whether or not we are *obligated* to impose such losses on ourselves. Because Unger's argument is predicated on a false normative

principle, his argument for Pretty Demanding Dictate is unsound.

In order for Singer's argument for the obligation to assist to be sound, his principle (P<sub>2</sub>) must be true, but is (P<sub>2</sub>) true? Singer suggests that it is the truth of (P<sub>2</sub>) that accounts for the wrongness of letting the child drown. To be sure, (P<sub>2</sub>) entails that it is wrong to let the child drown, but so do many other weaker principles. Consider the following highly specific principle:

- (P<sub>3</sub>) If one encounters a young child drowning in a shallow pond and one can save the child without personal risk and without ruining more than \$400 worth of clothes, then one ought to save the child.

Like (P<sub>2</sub>), (P<sub>3</sub>) also entails that it is wrong to let the child drown. So, it is not clear that it is (P<sub>2</sub>)'s truth that accounts for the wrongfulness of letting the child drown. Perhaps, it is the truth of (P<sub>3</sub>) instead. To be sure, one can rightfully object that (P<sub>3</sub>) is not couched at the appropriate level of generality for a normative principle. The point of mentioning (P<sub>3</sub>) is just to show that there are considerably weaker principles than (P<sub>2</sub>) that can account for the wrongness of letting the child drown. Because other weaker principles can account for the wrongfulness of letting the child drown, Singer's example does not show that (P<sub>2</sub>) is true. Here is a more plausible principle:

- (P<sub>4</sub>) Other things being equal, if you can prevent an innocent person from dying with minimal effort, with no noticeable reduction in your standard of living or the standard of living of your dependents, with no risk to yourself or others, and without thereby failing to fulfill any other more pressing obligation, then you ought to do so.

Unlike (P<sub>3</sub>), (P<sub>4</sub>) is sufficiently general to provide normative guidance in a wide variety of circumstances. Moreover, (P<sub>4</sub>) also entails that it would be wrong of you to let the child drown. Granted, if you wade into the pond, you will ruin your cotton twill pants, your oxford cloth shirt,

and your tweed jacket, but being a professor you have several tweed jackets, several pairs of Dockers, and numerous oxford cloth shirts. Even if the clothes you are wearing are completely ruined, there will be no noticeable difference in your standard of living. You will simply wear different clothes that are already hanging in your closet. My modest principle (P<sub>4</sub>) has another thing going for it, as well. Anyone, like you, who believes (B<sub>3</sub>), (B<sub>8</sub>), (B<sub>10</sub>), (B<sub>12</sub>), (B<sub>17</sub>), and (B<sub>18</sub>) is already committed to (P<sub>4</sub>), on pain of inconsistency.

Your beliefs [(B<sub>1</sub>), (B<sub>2</sub>), (B<sub>8</sub>), and (B<sub>10</sub>)] also commit you to another minimalistic principle:

- (P<sub>5</sub>) If you can help to reduce the amount of unnecessary suffering in the world with minimal effort on your part, with no risk to yourself or others, with no noticeable reduction in your standard of living or the standard of living of your dependents, and without thereby failing to fulfill any other more pressing obligation, then you ought to do so.

Now here's the rub. Any affluent or moderately affluent person who is committed to (P<sub>4</sub>) and (P<sub>5</sub>) is already committed to the obligatoriness of sending a portion of her income to famine relief organizations and/or other organizations working to reduce unnecessary suffering. Consider the implications of your commitment to (P<sub>4</sub>). According to (P<sub>4</sub>), you ought to prevent a person from dying if you can do so with minimal effort and no noticeable reduction in your standard of living or that of your dependents, all else being equal. By sending a modest portion of your income to OXFAM, CARE, or UNICEF, you can prevent many innocent children from dying unnecessarily. Plus, you can do so with no noticeable reduction in your or your dependents' standards of living, and your doing so will not prevent you from fulfilling any more pressing obligation. So, according to (P<sub>4</sub>), you ought to do so: It is worth noting that your belief (B<sub>18</sub>)—it is wrong to let an innocent person die *when one can prevent that death with minimal effort and negligible sacrifice on one's part*—entails the same result. By not sending money to famine-relief

organizations like those listed above, you are letting numerous innocent children under the age of 5 die when you could have easily prevented their deaths with *little effort* (writing out a check) and *minimal sacrifice* on your part (no noticeable reduction in your standard of living). (B<sub>18</sub>) entails that it is wrong of you to let these children die. Thus, your beliefs about the intrinsic badness of unnecessary childhood deaths and our duties to help prevent such deaths commit you to the obligatoriness of sending a portion of your income to organizations like OXFAM, CARE, and UNICEF to prevent some of those innocent children from dying.

Your beliefs about the intrinsic badness of unnecessary suffering [(B<sub>1</sub>) and (B<sub>2</sub>)] and your beliefs about our duties to minimize such suffering [(B<sub>8</sub>), (B<sub>10</sub>), (B<sub>12</sub>), and (B<sub>13</sub>)] together commit you to the view that you ought to help reduce the amount of unnecessary suffering in the world when you can do so with minimal effort, with no risk to yourself or others, and with no noticeable reduction in your standard of living [i.e., they commit you to (P<sub>5</sub>)]. Children living in absolute poverty don't only *die* from starvation. They *suffer* terribly from unrelenting hunger and its attendant diseases, including impaired brain development, measles, chronic diarrhea, chronic fatigue, and wasting. Sending a modest portion of your income to OXFAM, CARE, or UNICEF will enable these organizations to provide food, clean water, and needed medications to numerous malnourished children, thereby alleviating their suffering and greatly reducing their risk of disease. Because you can easily do so (by making out a check) with no risk to yourself or to others, with no noticeable reduction in your standard of living, and without failing to perform any other more serious obligation, your beliefs, together with their concomitant, (P<sub>5</sub>), entail that you ought to do so.

Your other beliefs support the same conclusion. You believe (B<sub>9</sub>)—a morally good person will take steps to make the world a better place and even stronger steps to avoid making the world a worse place—and (B<sub>10</sub>)—even a “minimally decent person” would take steps to help reduce the amount of unnecessary pain, suffering, and death in the world *if s/he could do so with little effort on her/his part*. You also

believe that you are a morally good person [(B<sub>11</sub>)], or at least a minimally decent one [(B<sub>12</sub>)], and that you are the kind of person who would take steps to help reduce the amount of pain, suffering, and death in the world *if you could do so with little effort on your part* [(B<sub>13</sub>)]. As we have already seen, *with minimal effort and negligible sacrifice*, you could take steps to help reduce both the number of unnecessary childhood deaths and the amount of unnecessary suffering experienced by these impoverished children just by writing out a modest check to OXFAM, CARE, UNICEF, or some other humanitarian organization working effectively to reduce the amount of unnecessary suffering in the world. Given (B<sub>10</sub>), you ought to provide modest support to one (or more) of these organizations. Given (B<sub>12</sub>) and (B<sub>13</sub>), if you really are the kind of person you think you are, you will provide such support to one (or more) of these organizations.

We have just seen that consistency with your other beliefs requires that you send a portion of your income to famine-relief organizations and/or other organizations working to reduce unnecessary suffering and prevent unnecessary death. But how much of your money are you obligated to send to such worthy organizations? Here I must appeal to your belief (B<sub>14</sub>). Because you take yourself to be an intellectually honest individual, you must honestly ask yourself how much can you afford to send to famine relief organizations with no noticeable reduction in your standard of living (or in the standard of living of your dependents). Granted, just how much money you can send without noticeably reducing your standard of living will depend on what stage of life you are in and on the extent of your financial resources. Even so, I submit that, like most moderately affluent people, you could easily divert 2% of your income to such worthy causes as famine relief and global population control without the slightest noticeable change in your current standard of living. I arrived at this number in the following highly scientific manner. I asked my teaching assistant who makes \$9,000 per year if he could send 1% of his income (\$90 per year, \$7.50 per month) to famine-relief organizations with no noticeable difference in his current

standard of living, and he said, “Yes.” Almost everyone reading this article, except for students who are being forced to read it for a class, makes considerably more money than my teaching assistant; and although it may be true that you have more financial obligations than my T.A. (your house payment, insurance, college tuition for your children, etc. versus his rent, insurance, student fees, etc.), still, given the law of marginal utility, if he can afford to send 1% of his income with no noticeable reduction in his standard of living, you can almost certainly afford to send 2% of your income without noticeably reducing your standard of living. As overpaid philosophy professors, many of you make \$40,000 a year. Two percent of \$40,000 is \$800/year or \$15/week. Sending \$15/week to famine-relief organizations would prevent more than 250 innocent children under age 5 from dying annually, and your life wouldn't be worse off in any noticeable way. Did your standard of living change *in any noticeable way* when George “Read My Lips” Bush increased your taxes by 2% (while promising to cut them)? No. So, it is extremely doubtful that you would be able to notice a 2% reduction in your current income level, especially if you have your credit card billed automatically for \$60 each month. It would be just another monthly payment that you wouldn't even notice.

Many of you could send an even greater percentage of your income (perhaps as much as 5% of your income) with no noticeable reduction in your standard of living. As I said earlier, this is where intellectual honesty comes in. You must honestly determine what percentage of your income you could send to famine-relief organizations without noticeably reducing your standard of living and without thereby failing to fulfill any other overriding obligations, for, according to your own beliefs, that percentage is the *minimum* amount that you are morally required to send to famine-relief organizations and/or other organizations working to reduce unnecessary suffering. One thing seems reasonably clear: You could easily send 1% of your income to such worthy organizations as OXFAM, CARE, UNICEF, and IPPF with no noticeable difference in your standard of living or the standard of living of any of your

dependents. Because your beliefs commit you to (P<sub>4</sub>) and (P<sub>5</sub>), your beliefs commit you to contributing at the very least 1% of your income, and probably 2% or more, to such important organizations. To do any less is seriously immoral, *by your own standards*.

What about students? Because students also accept (B<sub>1</sub>)–(B<sub>19</sub>), their beliefs likewise entail that if they can reduce the number of innocent children starving to death *with minimal effort and negligible sacrifice on their part*, then they ought to do so. The question is whether they can do so with minimal effort and sacrifice. If you're a student, money's tight, right? As a student struggling to pay your own bills, can you really be morally obligated to support organizations working to save the lives of innocent impoverished children? The answer will no doubt vary from student to student, but here again, intellectual honesty must play a role. Would your life really be any worse off, say, if you had one less beer (\$2.00) or café latté (\$2.50) per week, or one less pack of cigarettes (\$4.00) per month? Or suppose you bought one less CD (\$15.00) every two months. Would that really make your life noticeably worse off? (How many CDs sit unused on your shelf anyway?) If we are honest with ourselves, most of us, *including most students*, have to admit that we make lots of frivolous purchases. Reducing the number of these frivolous purchases ever so slightly won't make any noticeable difference in our quality of life, and, in some cases, reducing the number of these purchases would actually improve both our health and the quality of our lives—e.g., reducing the number of cigarettes one smokes or the number of high-fat café lattés one drinks. By way of illustration, suppose you drank one fewer café latté per week. As a result, you would save \$10 per month. By simply sending the \$10 saved each month to OXFAM, you would, over the course of a year, prevent 40 children from dying soon, and your standard of living would remain essentially the same. If you are absolutely crazy about café lattés and feel your life wouldn't be complete without a latté a day, then you must honestly ask yourself whether you could cut back on some other frivolous purchases without noticeably reducing the quality of your life. Even buying just one fewer CD *per year* and sending that \$15.00 to UNICEF would

prevent 5 children from dying soon. The point is simply this: By cutting out a frivolous purchase here or there, even students could help to reduce the number of innocent children suffering and dying from absolute poverty and malnutrition *with minimal effort and no noticeable reduction in their standards of living*.

The moral of the present section is clear: Consistency with your own beliefs forces you to admit: (i) that you are morally obligated to send a portion of your income to famine-relief organizations and/or other organizations working to reduce the amount of unnecessary pain, suffering, and death in the world and (ii) that the minimum you are obligated to send is whatever amount you could send with no noticeable reduction in your or your dependents' standards of living and without thereby failing to meet any of your other more stringent obligations. For most of us, that means sending 2% of our income to such organizations (which amounts to around 1.5% of your income after taxes). For most students, it means cutting back on a few frivolous purchases and sending the money saved to one of these organizations. To make fulfilling this obligation as easy and effortless as possible, I have provided the addresses and phone numbers for OXFAM, CARE, UNICEF, and IPPF at the end of this article.

#### 4. WHY YOU ARE COMMITTED TO THE MORAL OBLIGATORIENESS OF (O<sub>2</sub>)

You have just seen that your beliefs entail that you are obligated:

(O<sub>1</sub>) To send a modest portion of our income to humanitarian organizations working to reduce the amount of unnecessary suffering in the world.

But our duties to the world's absolutely poor don't stop with (O<sub>1</sub>). As we shall presently see, your beliefs also entail that we are obligated:

(O<sub>2</sub>) To refrain from squandering food that could be fed to the world's absolutely poor, especially when doing so involves no risk to ourselves or others.

#### A. Malnutrition

When we think of malnutrition, images of poor starving children wasting away in undeveloped nations quickly come to mind. We don't think of the obese people suffering from diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease that are all too common in developed countries. But these latter people are clearly malnourished, as well. The fact is that there are two kinds of malnutrition—undernutrition and overnutrition—and both of them result in preventable disease, unnecessary suffering, and premature death. *Undernutrition* arises when a person consumes insufficient calories and/or insufficient macro- and micro-nutrients to meet the basic energy and nutrient requirements for normal biological and metabolic function. Undernutrition causes a wide variety of deficiency diseases including: tissue wasting (due to protein deficiency); brain underdevelopment (due to inadequate fat consumption prior to age 2); blindness (vitamin A deficiency); scurvy (vitamin C deficiency), beriberi (thiamin deficiency), and pellagra (niacin and protein deficiency); and death from starvation (insufficient calories). These diseases, so common in undeveloped countries, are virtually nonexistent in developed nations. *Overnutrition* arises when one consumes too many calories, excess fat, excess saturated fat, excess protein, excess cholesterol, excess refined sugar, and excess sodium. Overnutrition gives rise to a wide variety of diseases of excess: coronary artery disease, stroke and other arteriosclerotic diseases (excess cholesterol, saturated fat, transfatty acids, and iron); obesity (excess fat and calories); hypertension (excess fat, calories, and sodium), diabetes mellitus (excess fat, calories, and refined sugar), some forms of cancer (excess fat), and osteoporosis (excess protein consumption, coupled with inactivity). These diseases, rampant in developed countries, are practically unheard of in underdeveloped countries. As we shall see, both forms of malnutrition have the same root cause, a form of agriculture that (i) fosters overnutrition and (ii) systematically requires the overnourished to squander food that could have been made available to the undernourished.

#### B. Day-Old Bread: Why Squandering Food in a World of Scarcity Is Morally Wrong

**Day-Old Bread:** Suppose there is a small bakery in my neighborhood that sells its day-old bread at one-third of the regular price. The bakery doesn't want to run out of bread for its full-paying customers, so it typically bakes twelve more loaves of bread than it anticipates needing. Also suppose there is a small homeless shelter for battered women and children in the neighborhood. It can afford to buy only the discounted day-old bread. When there is no day-old bread available, these people go without bread for the day. Suppose I know all these facts, but I, nevertheless, start buying the remaining twelve loaves of bread (in addition to the loaf I regularly buy) right before the bakery closes each day just because I like the way it makes my kitchen smell. As a result, there is no longer any day-old bread available. Of course, I can't eat that much bread. So, the next day, when that fresh-baked smell is gone, I simply throw all twelve loaves of bread in the garbage. By squandering food in this way, I have knowingly caused the women and children in the shelter to go hungry, and I have done so just to satisfy my trivial desire to have my kitchen smell a certain way. Finally, suppose I keep up my bread-purchasing habit for so long that some of these women and children end up dying from hunger-related diseases.

Have I done anything wrong? Your beliefs entail that I have. You believe that a world with more *unnecessary* suffering is worse than a world with less *unnecessary* suffering [(B<sub>2</sub>)], and you also believe that we ought to avoid making the world a worse place when we can do so with minimal effort and negligible sacrifice [(B<sub>8</sub>)]. In Day-Old Bread, I have knowingly squandered food that these women and children would have been able to eat and have, thus, knowingly caused them to suffer unnecessarily just so that I could experience a certain olfactory sensation. I have knowingly made the world a worse place by increasing the amount of unnecessary suffering it contains for an entirely trivial reason. Here, I have actively and knowingly

made others worse off. One thing I could have easily done to avoid making the world a worse place would have been to purchase only the bread I need, leaving the rest for others to consume. Perhaps, it would not be wrong of me to purchase vastly more bread than I need in a world where everyone's food needs were adequately met, but as your beliefs rightly reveal, it is wrong of me to waste food that could be fed to severely undernourished humans who desperately need that food. Simply put, your beliefs entail that we are obligated to (O<sub>2</sub>)—to refrain from squandering food that could be fed to others who desperately need it.

**Multi-Squanderer Scenario:** Suppose I am not unique in my desire to smell fresh-baked bread. Suppose that there are people in every community in America who enjoy the smell of fresh-baked bread as much as I do and who, like me, buy up all the available bread at their local bakeries just before closing time so that there is no day-old bread available anywhere in the country. And suppose that, as a result, women and children in shelters all across North America are starving to death, just so lots of other North Americans can enjoy the smell of fresh-baked bread. Does the fact that lots of other people are squandering bread in this way make it any less wrong of me to squander the bread from my local bakery? Not one bit. The fact that other people are behaving immorally does not justify my doing so. Given your beliefs, the only difference between Day-Old Bread and Multi-Squanderer Scenario is that in the latter case lots of other people are just as morally culpable as I am.

#### C. Eating in a World of Scarcity: (O<sub>2</sub>)'s Implications

Day-Old Bread illustrates that your beliefs commit you to the moral obligatoriness of not squandering food that could be fed to the world's absolutely poor. You are not alone in this commitment. Anyone who believes (B<sub>1</sub>)–(B<sub>19</sub>), and that includes almost everyone, is committed to the obligatoriness of (O<sub>2</sub>). Even without appealing to (B<sub>1</sub>)–(B<sub>19</sub>), almost everyone would agree that it is wrong to

knowingly throw away bread that could save other people's lives and that, therefore, we are obligated not to squander food in this way. What most people don't realize is that in order to fulfill obligation (O<sub>2</sub>), they must radically change the way they eat.

If you are like most moderately affluent people, you eat meat and lots of it: bacon or sausage for breakfast, one or two quarter-pound hamburgers for lunch, and steak, pork chops, or chicken for dinner. For most people in affluent nations, eating this way is normal—it's how they were raised to eat—and it seems not only permissible, but downright wholesome. But things are not always as they seem. The burden of the present section is to show that anyone who believes (B<sub>1</sub>)–(B<sub>10</sub>) is already committed, on pain of inconsistency, to the immorality of eating most meat. Elsewhere, I have argued that beliefs like (B<sub>1</sub>), (B<sub>2</sub>), (B<sub>8</sub>), (B<sub>8'</sub>), and (B<sub>10</sub>) commit us to the immorality of eating meat and other animal products because of the enormous amount of unnecessary *animal* suffering modern animal factories generate.<sup>7</sup> Here, I am interested in the untold *human* suffering that such a system of agriculture produces.

The numbers used in Day-Old Bread were not chosen at random. They were chosen because it takes 12.9 pounds of grain to produce one pound of beef. This grain could be fed directly to the world's starving poor, but instead it is fed to intentionally bred cows—cows that would not have existed and, hence, would not have needed to be fed, had we not artificially inseminated their mothers. These cows, in turn, convert that grain to manure. By cycling grain through cattle to produce animal protein, we lose 90% of that grain's protein, 96% of its calories, 100% of its carbohydrates, and 100% of its fiber. By cycling grain through cattle so that affluent people can eat meat, starving *humans* are being deprived of that grain so that *cows* can be fed. As a result, while more than 1 billion humans experience chronic hunger, cows in feedlots never go hungry. Playing off our Day-Old Bread analogy, those 12.9 pounds of grain could have been converted to 12.9 loaves of bread that could have, in turn, been fed to the world's starving poor. Instead, that grain/bread is wasted, just so people in

affluent nations can eat meat and other animal products. There is no way around it: Whenever one purchases a pound of beef, one is supporting a system of agriculture that effectively squanders 12.9 pounds of grain for every pound of beef produced.

Although beef production is one of the most inefficient means of food production, all forms of animal agriculture are highly inefficient. Of the 12 million tons of grain protein produced in the United States in 1991, 10 million tons were fed to livestock, leaving only 2 million tons for human consumption. Of the 9.2 million tons of legume protein produced in the United States that year, 9 million tons were fed to livestock, leaving only 0.2 million ton for human consumption. For the 21 million tons of plant protein fed to livestock, we received only 7 million tons of livestock protein in return (a 33% protein-conversion efficiency rate). The end result is a net loss of 14 million tons of protein, protein that could have saved the lives of starving children had it not been squandered on livestock production. And protein isn't the only macronutrient we lose by feeding grain to livestock. We also lose all of that grain's carbohydrates and fiber (meat contains no carbohydrates or fiber) and approximately 90% of its caloric energy. I noted at the outset that the United States grows more than enough grain and soybeans to feed the world's entire human population. Unfortunately, most of that grain is squandered on livestock production. Of the estimated 740 kg of grain grown in the United States per person per year, 663 kg are fed to livestock, leaving only 77 kg for human consumption.<sup>8</sup> Were we to forego foods of animal origin and eat that grain directly, there would be more than enough grain left over to feed the world's starving human population.

The irony is that the same system of agriculture that deprives starving humans of grain, thereby contributing to undernutrition in poor nations, is also one of the primary causes of overnutrition in affluent nations. It is now an established fact that diets high in saturated fat and cholesterol greatly increase the risk of several chronic degenerative diseases, including heart disease, hypertension, obesity, diabetes, and some forms of cancer. We also know

that meat and animal products are the principal sources of saturated fat and cholesterol in standard Western diets. The evidence is so compelling that the American Dietetic Association, the leading nutritional organization in the United States, now maintains:

Scientific data suggest positive relationships between a vegetarian diet and reduced risk for several chronic degenerative diseases and conditions, including obesity, coronary artery disease, hypertension, diabetes mellitus, and some types of cancer. *It is the position of The American Dietetic Association (ADA) that appropriately planned vegetarian diets are healthful, are nutritionally adequate, and provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases.*<sup>9</sup>

The ADA also holds:

Well-planned vegan and lacto-ovo vegetarian diets are appropriate for all stages of the life cycle, including during pregnancy and lactation. Appropriately planned vegan and lacto-ovo vegetarian diets satisfy nutrient needs of infants, children, and adolescents and promote normal growth.

One result of feeding our children a meat-based diet—childhood obesity—is both ironic and sad. While children in underdeveloped countries are starving to death, more than one-fifth of U.S. children are obese. In addition, the damage to coronary arteries arising from a meat-based diet begins remarkably early. Dr. Spock points out: "Fatty deposits are now typically found in the coronary arteries of children on a typical American diet by the age of three. And by the age of twelve, they are found in 70% of children." As a result, Dr. Spock recommends vegan diets for all children over the age of 2. These last observations demonstrate that our duty not to squander food is not overridden by a biological need to consume meat and animal products. There is no such need. Neither adults nor children need to consume any animal products at all. As the ADA has averred, appropriately planned vegan diets—diets devoid of meat

and animal products—are *nutritionally adequate* for all stages of the life cycle. If Dr. Spock is right, appropriately planned vegan diets are *nutritionally superior* to meat-based diets. Either way, we have no need for meat and animal products. We eat them only because we like the way they taste.

Does the desire for a particular taste sensation justify us in squandering food that could be fed to starving children? No. In Day-Old Bread, we saw that your beliefs entail the wrongness of squandering 12 loaves of bread just so one can experience a particular olfactory sensation. By doing so, one not only fails to benefit others, one actively makes others worse off. Of course, by purchasing meat because one likes its taste, one is squandering 12 pounds of grain, just to experience a particular gustatory sensation, and, in so doing, one is actively making others—those in desperate need of that grain—worse off. Surely, the fact that it is a *gustatory* sensation, rather than an *olfactory* sensation, is not morally relevant. Because your beliefs entail that it is wrong to squander bread in Day-Old Bread, your beliefs also entail that it is wrong to squander grain by purchasing meat. Hence, your commitment to the obligatoriness of not squandering grain commits you to the obligatoriness of adopting a predominantly plant-based diet devoid of meat and animal products obtained from grain-fed animals. Because virtually all commercially produced meat (including beef, pork, chicken, turkey, and farm-raised fish), dairy products, and eggs come from grain-fed animals, consistency with your own beliefs requires that you adopt a quasi-vegan diet devoid of beef, pork, chicken, turkey, farm-raised fish, dairy products, and eggs.<sup>10</sup>

One might object that (O<sub>2</sub>) does not entail the obligatoriness of adopting such a diet on the grounds that the difficulty of planning a nutritionally balanced quasi-vegan diet for oneself and one's family simply makes such a diet too risky. Such an objection is entirely unfounded. It is extremely easy to eat a nutritionally balanced vegan diet. No special food combining is necessary. All one need do is eat sufficient calories centered around the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine's *new* four food groups: I. Whole Grains

(5+ servings/day), II. Vegetables (3+ servings/day), III. Fruits (3+ servings/day), and IV. Legumes (2+ servings/day). Anyone who eats the recommended daily servings from these new four groups will be eating a nutritionally sound plant-based diet. And far from being risky, such a diet will reduce one's risk of heart disease, cancer, stroke, hypertension, obesity, and diabetes.

There is no justification for squandering precious grain reserves in a world of food scarcity. This conclusion is not derived from some highly contentious ethical theory you likely reject, but from beliefs you already hold. Consistency with your own beliefs entails that it's wrong to squander food that could be fed to the world's starving poor for trivial reasons like taste or smell. Because modern meat, dairy, and egg production necessarily squanders grain that could be fed directly to humans, *your own beliefs* entail that it is wrong to consume these products, which, in turn, entails that quasi-vegan diets are obligatory.

## 5. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

### A. The Iteration Objection

In Section 3, after showing that Singer's and Unger's attempts to defend highly demanding dictates fail, I argued that your beliefs commit you to two *much less demanding* normative principles ( $P_4$ ) and ( $P_5$ ), which, in turn, entail that you are obligated to ( $O_1$ )—to send a modest portion of your income to famine-relief organizations and/or other organizations working to reduce unnecessary suffering. The present worry is that these two principles will ultimately reduce to the very same highly demanding dictate from which I was aiming to distance myself. Because *standards of living* are vague and lack precise boundaries, there can be a repeated series of non-noticeable reductions in one's standard of living, such that, before long, one is radically worse off than one's original starting position, and noticeably so.

My response is quite simple. Neither ( $P_4$ ) nor ( $P_5$ ) is intended to be iterated in this way. In fact, ( $P_4$ ) and ( $P_5$ ) are intended to be compatible with

gradual increases in one's standard of living so as to enable one to do even more to help reduce the amount of unnecessary suffering down the road. To block the iteration objection and to make explicit the kinds of principles your beliefs clearly commit you to, ( $P_4$ ) and ( $P_5$ )—as they apply to *moderately affluent* people—should be restricted as follows: The principles never require a moderately affluent person to have a standard of living *noticeably* lower than the highest standard of living she has ever enjoyed. Even with this restriction in place, ( $P_4$ ) and ( $P_5$ ) still entail that most of us are morally required to send at least 2% of our income to famine-relief organizations and/or other organizations working to reduce unnecessary suffering. The reason is this: Because standards of living typically continue to improve the longer people are in the workforce, most people are currently enjoying their highest standards of living. ( $P_4$ ) and ( $P_5$ ) require these people to provide whatever amount of financial assistance they can provide without noticeably lowering their standard of living from its current optimal level.

### B. The Libertarian Objection: There Are No Positive Duties

Strict libertarians insist that although we have negative duties to do no harm, we have *no* positive duties to assist others. Thus, on the libertarian view, it would not be wrong of you to let the child drown in Singer's Pond. Libertarians maintain that even though you could save the child with minimal sacrifice and no risk to yourself, you have absolutely no positive obligation to assist the child in any way. Because they deny the existence of positive duties, libertarians contend that it also would *not* be wrong of you *not* to save the lives of numerous starving children by sending a modest portion of your income to famine-relief organizations. Granted, libertarians do think that it would be *good* of you to wade in and save the child. They also think it would be *good* of you to send money to such worthy causes as famine relief, but these actions would be entirely supererogatory on your part. Thus, the libertarian objection runs as follows:

Because there are *no* positive duties, we have *no* obligation to send money to famine-relief organizations, even though that money would save the lives of numerous innocent children.

As noted earlier, Narveson claims that such a libertarian "nobody-needs-to-help-anybody" stance is unreasonable. A variation on the trolley problem suggests that he is right. Suppose that six innocent people are trapped on the tracks and a runaway trolley is barreling down on them. Fortunately, you just happen to be standing right next to a switch which, if flipped, will divert the trolley onto a second track. Even more fortunately, unlike typical trolley problems where three people are trapped on the second track and you have to decide between killing three and letting six die, in the present trolley case, no one is on the other track and so, if the switch is flipped, the train will be diverted to the second track where it will roll safely to a stop with no one being injured. The question is this: Are you morally required to flip the switch and save the six people? Not according to the libertarian. Even though you are standing right next to the switch and can flip the switch with little effort and no sacrifice on your part, with no risk to yourself or others, and without thereby violating any other obligations, the libertarian maintains that it would *not* be wrong of you to let the six die by not flipping the switch.

Such a position strikes most of us as morally outrageous. You *should* flip the switch, and it would be *clearly wrong* of you not to do so. And you, no doubt, agree. Because you believe that one should wade into the pond to save the child [(B<sub>7</sub>)], you surely think it would be wrong not to flip the switch. I realize that a die-hard libertarian might remain unconvinced, but you are not a die-hard libertarian. You believe that there are both positive and negative duties. Thus, the libertarian objection under consideration gives *you* absolutely no reason to think that ( $O_1$ ) is not obligatory.

### C. Malthusian Musings

A common reason offered for not sending money to famine-relief organizations is that doing so will just exacerbate the problem. If lots more children under

age 5 survive, then when they reach puberty and start having their own children, there will be even more mouths to feed, and as a result, there will be even more human suffering due to starvation. In short, it is better to let 12 million children starve to death each year than to save them and have two or three times that many children starving 15 years from now.

Couched in the more scientific language of ecology, the Malthusian objection runs as follows: Left unchecked, organisms will reproduce until they reach the carrying capacity  $K$  of their respective ecosystems. Once they exceed  $K$ , there will be a major crash in the population size of that organism. By feeding starving humans, the anti-assistance argument goes, we are simply speeding up the time at which we exceed the Earth's  $K$  for humans (hereafter  $K_h$ ). Better to let 12 million children starve to death each year than to exceed  $K_h$  and have an even more devastating population crash.

The first thing to note is that we don't think Malthusian worries about exceeding  $K_h$  give us a good reason to let our own children starve. But if we don't let our children starve, then, as adults, they will probably procreate, thereby hastening the time when  $K_h$  is exceeded. If ecologically based, global human population concerns give us a reason to let distant children die, they give us an equally good reason to let our own children die. You wouldn't think of letting your own children die to help reduce human population. Thus you must not find letting children starve to death to be a legitimate way to curb human population growth.

Second, there are other more effective ways of reducing human population growth: improving educational opportunities and employment opportunities *for women* (which drives up the opportunity cost of procreation), improving the economic security of the elderly, providing ready access to birth control, and providing abortion services.<sup>11</sup> Even more draconian policies, like mandatory sterilization after having one child, are preferable to letting children starve to death. Because there are numerous more effective means of curbing population growth than letting innocent children starve, anyone who accepts (B<sub>19</sub>) must think it wrong to let

innocent children starve as a means of population control.

Third, demographic studies repeatedly show that childhood morality rates and birthrates are positively correlated—as childhood mortality rates decline, so do birthrates—and so, supporting famine-relief organizations working to reduce the number of unnecessary childhood deaths is, paradoxically, a way of slowing population growth. But suppose you question the validity of these studies. Suppose you dig in your Malthusian heels and insist that feeding the world's starving children will increase the number of humans suffering from starvation down the road. Such insistence does not absolve you from obligation ( $O_1$ ); it just means that you are obligated to fulfill it in a different way. Instead of being required to send money to a famine-relief organization, you will be obligated to send money to humanitarian organizations, like the IPPF, that are working to reduce the rate of population growth in underdeveloped countries through effective birth control measures.

Fourth, those who take Malthusian concerns seriously are even more obligated to refrain from consuming meat and other animal products, because intentionally breeding millions of cows and pigs and billions of chickens greatly reduces the world's  $K_h$ . Intentionally adding billions of farm animals to the world greatly increases the number of animal mouths that must be fed and, thus, greatly reduces the amount of food available for human consumption.

## NOTES

- Following Peter Singer (who borrows the term from Robert McNamara), I use 'absolute poverty' to refer to "a condition of life so characterised by malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, squalid surroundings, high infant mortality and low life expectancy as to be beneath any reasonable definition of human decency" (Singer 1993, p. 219). Singer reports that, according to the World Watch Institute, as many as 1.2 billion people live in absolute poverty (pp. 219–20).
- Aiken (1997), pp. 86 and 93. Aiken argues that one's right to be saved from starvation is claimable

against all persons who satisfy three minimal conditions: (i) they must know that the person is starving, (ii) they must have the means necessary to save the person, and (iii) they must be able to save the person without placing themselves in an equally bad or worse situation than the person they are saving (pp. 91–93).

- By "without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance" Singer means "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

## 6. CONCLUSION

The implications of your beliefs are clear. Given your beliefs, it follows that we are morally obligated to ( $O_1$ )—to send a modest portion of our income to famine-relief organizations and/or other organizations working to reduce the amount of unnecessary pain, suffering, and death in the world—and to ( $O_2$ )—to refrain from squandering food that could be fed to the world's absolutely poor. ( $O_2$ ), in turn, entails that we are obligated to adopt a quasi-vegan diet, rather than squander grain on a meat-based diet. These conclusions were not derived from some highly contentious ethical theory that you can easily reject, but from your own firmly held beliefs. Consequently, consistency demands that you embrace these obligations and modify your behavior accordingly.

## Appendix

Oxfam America	United Nations
26 West St.	Children's Fund
Boston, MA 02111	333 East 38th St.
1-800-OXFAM US	New York, NY 10016
[1-800-693-2687].	UNICEF: 1-800-
International Planned	FOR KIDS
Parenthood	[1-800-367-5437]
Federation	CARE
(IPPF)	151 Ellis St.
902 Broadway,	Atlanta, GA 30303
10th Floor	1-800-521-CARE
New York, NY 10010	[1-800-521-2273]

significance to the bad thing that we prevent" (Singer 1972, p. 234).

- Obviously, if you do not hold these beliefs (or enough of them), my argument will have no force for you, nor is it intended to. It is only aimed at those of you who do hold these widespread commonsense beliefs.
- By "unnecessary suffering" I mean suffering which serves no greater, outweighing justifying good. If some instance of suffering is required to bring about a greater good (e.g., a painful root canal may be the only way to save a person's tooth), then that suffering is *not* unnecessary. Thus, in the case of ( $B_2$ ), no *ceteris paribus* clause is needed, because if other things are *not* equal such that the suffering in question is justified by an overriding justifying good that can only be achieved by allowing that suffering, then that suffering is *not* unnecessary.
- By a "minimally decent person" I mean a person who does the very minimum required by morality and no more. I borrow this terminology from Judith Jarvis Thomson who distinguishes a *good* Samaritan from a *minimally decent* Samaritan. See Thomson (1971), pp. 62–65.
- See Engel (2000), pp. 856–889. There I documented that the routine unanaesthetized mutilations (castration, branding, dehorning, debeaking, dubbing, tail docking, and tooth pulling) and abysmal living conditions which farm

animals are forced to endure in factory farms, along with inhumane transportation and slaughter processes, greatly increase the amount of unnecessary suffering in the world; and I argued that because you could easily take steps to help reduce such unnecessary suffering by eating something other than meat, consistency with your beliefs forces you to admit that eating meat is morally wrong.

- Data on protein production and consumption and grain production and consumption taken from Pimentel and Pimentel (1996), pp. 77–78.
- American Dietetic Association (1997), p. 1317. For those wishing to learn more about sound vegetarian nutrition, the ADA has published this article in its entirety at: <http://www.andjnl.org/article/S0002-8223%2897%2900314-3/fulltext>.
- ( $O_2$ ) does not entail that it is wrong to eat meat *per se*, e.g. it does *not* entail that eating the flesh of wild animals is wrong. Hence, the use of 'quasi-vegan' in the text. However, ( $O_2$ ) does entail that it is wrong to eat virtually all commercially produced meat and animal products because these products are obtained from grain-fed animals and their production necessarily squanders grain which could have been fed to starving humans.
- Regardless of one's views on abortion, presumably it would be better to abort a fetus quickly and relatively painlessly than to let that fetus be born only to starve to death slowly and painfully.

## REFERENCES

Aiken, William. 1977. "The Right to Be Saved from Starvation." In *World Hunger and Moral Obligation*, edited by William Aiken and Hugh LaFollette, pp. 85–102. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

American Dietetic Association. 1997. "Position of the American Dietetic Association: Vegetarian Diets." *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 97: 1317–21.

Engel, Mylan, Jr. 2000. "The Immorality of Eating Meat." In *The Moral Life*, edited by Louis Pojman, pp. 856–89. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Narveson, Jan. 1977. "Morality and Starvation." In *World Hunger and Moral Obligation*, edited by

William Aiken and Hugh LaFollette, pp. 49–65. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Pimentel, David and Marcia Pimentel. 1996. *Food, Energy, and Society*, rev. ed. Niwot, CO: University of Colorado Press.

Singer, Peter. 1972. "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1(3): 229–43.

—. 1993. *Practical Ethics*, 2d ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thomson, Judith Jarvis. 1971. "A Defense of Abortion." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1(1): 47–66.

Unger, Peter. 1996. *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.