

CHAPTER 17

Feeding the Hungry

Jan Narveson

Jan Narveson, a philosopher who teaches at the University of Waterloo in Canada, takes a contractarian approach to moral philosophy—morality, in this view, consists in the agreements that rational, self-interested people would make for their mutual benefit. In the following selection he argues, from this point of view, that we have no extensive obligations to aid needy people.

Throughout history it has been the lot of most people to know of others worse off than they, and often enough of others who face starvation. In the contemporary world, television and other mass media enable all of us in the better-off areas to hear about starvation in even the most remote places. What, if any, are our obligations toward victims of starvation?

This can be a rather complex subject in real-world situations. We must begin by distinguishing importantly different cases. For *starve* functions both as a passive verb, indicating something that happens to one, and as an active verb, designating something inflicted by one person on another. In the latter case, starvation is a form of killing, and of course comes under the same strictures that any other method of killing is liable to. But when the problem is plague, crop-failure due to drought, or sheer lack of know-how, there is no obviously guilty party. Then the question is whether we, the amply fed, are guilty parties if we fail to come to the rescue of those victims.

Reprinted by permission from Jan Narveson, *Moral Matters* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Broadview Press, 1993), pp. 138–150.

162

Starvation and Murder

If I lock you in a room with no food and don't let you out, I have murdered you. If group A burns the crops of group B, it has slaughtered the Bs. There is, surely, no genuine *issue* about such cases. It is wrong to kill innocent people, and one way of killing them is as eligible for condemnation by this principle as any other, so far as killing goes. Such cases are happily unusual, and we need say no more about them.

Our interest, then, is in the cases where this is not so, or at least not obviously so. But some writers, such as James Rachels, hold that letting someone die is morally equivalent to killing them. Or "basically" equivalent. Is this so? Most people do not think so; it takes a subtle philosophical argument to persuade them of this. The difference between a bad thing which I intentionally or at least foreseeably brought about, and one which just happened, through no fault of my own, matters to most of us in practice. Is our view sustainable in principle, too? Suppose the case is one I could do something about, as when you are starving and my granary is burgeoning. Does that make a difference?

Duties of Justice and Duties of Charity

Another important question, which has cropped up in some of our other cases too but is nowhere more clearly relevant than here, is the distinction between *justice* and *charity*. By justice I here intend those things which we may, if necessary, be *forced* to do—where our actions can be constrained by others in order to ensure our performance. Charity, on the other hand, comes "from the heart": *Charity* means, roughly, *caring*, an emotionally-tinged desire to benefit other people just because they need it.

We should note a special point about this. It is often said that charity "cannot be compelled." Is this true? In one clear sense, it is. For in this sense, charity consists *only* of benefits motivated by love or concern. If instead you regard an act as one that we may forcibly compel people to do, then you are taking that act to be a case of *justice*. Can it at the same time be charity? It can if we detach the motive from the act, and define charity simply as doing good for others. The claim that charity in this second sense cannot be compelled is definitely not true by definition, and is in fact false. People are frequently compelled to do good for others, especially by our government, which taxes us in order to benefit the poor, educate the uneducated, and so on. Whether they *should* be thus compelled is a real moral question, however, and

must not be evaded by recourse to semantics. (Whether those programs produce benefits that outweigh their costs is a very complex question; but that they do often produce some benefits, at whatever cost, is scarcely deniable.)

When we ask, then, on which side of the moral divide we should put feeding the hungry—unenforceable charity, to be left to individual consciences, or enforceable justice, perhaps to be handled by governments—is a genuine moral issue, and an important one. We are asking whether feeding the hungry is not only something we ought to do but also something we *must* do, as a matter of justice. It is especially this latter question that concerns us in this chapter.

We should note also the logical possibility that someone might differ so strongly with most of us on this matter as to think it positively *wrong* to feed the hungry. That is a rather extreme view, but it looks rather like the view that some writers, such as Garrett Hardin, defend. However, it is misleading to characterize their view in this way. Hardin thinks that feeding the hungry is an exercise in *misguided* charity, not real charity. In feeding the hungry today, he argues, we merely create a much greater problem tomorrow, for feeding the relatively few now will create an unmanageably large number next time their crops fail, a number we won't be able to feed and who will consequently starve. Thus we actually cause more starvation by feeding people now than we do by not feeding them, hard though that may sound. Hardin, then, is not favouring cruelty toward the weak. The truly charitable, he believes, should be *against* feeding the hungry, at least in some types of cases.

Hardin's argument brings up the need for another distinction, of urgent importance: between *principles* and *policies*. Being in favour of feeding the hungry *in principle* may or may not imply that we should feed the particular persons involved in any specific case. For that may depend on further facts about those cases. For example, perhaps trying to feed *these* hungry people runs into the problem that the government of those hungry people doesn't want you feeding them. If the price of feeding them is that you must go to war, then it may not be the best thing to do. If enormous starvation faces a group in the farther future if the starving among them now are fed now, then a policy of feeding them now may not be recommended by a principle of humanity. And so on. Principles are relatively abstract and may be considered just by considering possibilities; but when it comes to policy pursued in the real world, facts cannot be ignored.

The Basic Issues

Our general question is what sort of moral concerns we have with the starving. The basic question then breaks down into these two: first, is there a *basic duty of justice* to feed the starving? And second, if there isn't, then is there a *basic requirement of charity* that we be disposed to do so, and if so, how strong is that requirement?

Justice and Starvation

Let's begin with the first. Is it *unjust* to let others starve to death? We must distinguish two very different ways in which someone might try to argue for this.

First, there are those who, like Rachels, argue that there is no fundamental distinction between killing and letting die. If that is right, then the duty not to kill is all we need to support the conclusion that there is a duty of justice not to let people starve, and the duty not to kill (innocent) people is uncontroversial. Second, however, some insist that feeding the hungry is a duty of justice even if we don't accept the equivalence of killing and letting-die. They therefore need a different argument, in support of a positive right to be fed. The two different views call for very different discussions.

Starving and Allowing to Starve

Starving and allowing-to-starve are special cases of killing and letting-die. Are they the same, as some insist? In our discussion of euthanasia, we saw the need for a crucial distinction here: between the view that they are literally indistinguishable, and the view that even though they are logically distinguishable, they are nevertheless morally equivalent. As to the first, the argument for nonidentity of the two is straightforward. When you kill someone, you do an act, *x*, which brings it about that the person is dead *when he would otherwise still be alive*. You induce a *change* (for the worse) in his condition. But when you let someone die, this is not so, for she would have died even if you had, say, been in Australia at the time. How can you be said to be the "cause" of something which would have happened if you didn't exist?

To be sure, we do often attribute causality to human inaction. But the clear cases of such attribution are those where the agent in question had an antecedent *responsibility* to do the thing in question. The geraniums may die because you fail to water them, but to say that

you thus *caused* them to die is to imply that you were *supposed* to do so. And of course we may agree that *if we have* a duty to feed the poor and we don't feed them, then we are at fault. But the question before us is *whether* we have this duty, and the argument we are examining purports to prove this by showing that even when we do nothing, we still "cause" their deaths. If the argument presupposes that very responsibility, it plainly begs the question rather than giving us a good answer to it. What about the claim that killing and letting die are "morally equivalent"? Here again, there is a danger of begging the question. *If* we have a duty to feed the hungry and we don't, then not doing so might be morally equivalent to killing them, perhaps—though I doubt that any proponent would seriously propose life imprisonment for failing to contribute to the cause of feeding the hungry! But again, the consequence clearly doesn't follow if we don't have that duty, which is in question. Those who think we do not have fundamental duties to take care of each other, but only duties to refrain from killing and the like will deny that they are morally equivalent.

The liberty proponent will thus insist that when Beethoven wrote symphonies instead of using his talents to grow food for the starving, like the peasants he depicted in his Pastoral symphony, he was doing what he had a perfect right to do. A connoisseur of music might go further and hold that he was also *doing the right thing*: that someone with the talents of a Beethoven does more for people by composing great music than by trying to save lives—even if he would have been *successful* in saving those lives, which is not terribly likely anyway!

How do we settle this issue? If we were all connoisseurs, it would be easy: if you know and love great music, you will find it easy to believe that a symphony by Beethoven or Mahler is worth more than prolonging the lives of a few hundred starvelings for another few miserable years. If you are one of those starving persons, your view might be different. (But it might not. Consider the starving artist in his garret, famed in Romantic novels and operas: they lived *voluntarily* in squalor, believing that what they were doing was worth the sacrifice.)

We are not all connoisseurs, nor are most of us starving. Advocates of welfare duties talk glibly as though there were a single point of view ("welfare") that dominates everything else. But it's not true. There are all kinds of points of view, diverse, and to a large extent incommensurable. Uniting them is not as simple as the welfarist or utilitarian may think. It is *not* certain, not obvious, that we "add more to the sum of human happiness" by supporting Oxfam than by supporting the opera. How are we to unite diverse people on these evaluative matters?

The most plausible answer, I think, is the point of view that allows different people to live their various lives, by forbidding interference with them. Rather than insisting, with threats to back it up, that I help someone for whose projects and purposes I have no sympathy whatever, let us all agree to respect each other's pursuits. We'll agree to let each person live as that person sees fit, with only our bumpings into each other being subject to public control. To do this, we need to draw a sort of line around each person, and insist that others not cross that line without the permission of the occupant. The rule will be not to forcibly intervene in the lives of others, thus requiring that our relations be mutually agreeable. Enforced feeding of the starving, however, does cross the line, invading the farmer or the merchant, forcing him to part with some of his hard-earned produce and give it without compensation to others. That, says the advocate of liberty, is theft, not charity.

So if someone is starving, we may pity him or we may be indifferent, but the question so far as our *obligations* are concerned is only this: how did he *get* that way? If it was not the result of my previous activities, then I have no obligation to him, and may help him out or not, as I choose. If it was such a result, then of course I must do something. If you live and have long lived downstream from me, and I decide to dam up the river and divert the water elsewhere, then I have deprived you of your water and must compensate you, by supplying you with the equivalent, or else desist. But if you live in the middle of a parched desert and it does not rain, so that you are faced with death from thirst, that is not my doing and I have no compensating to do.

This liberty-respecting idea avoids, by and large, the need to make the sort of utility comparisons essential to the utility or welfare view. If we have no general obligation to manufacture as much utility for others as possible, then we don't have to concern ourselves about measuring that utility. Being free to pursue our own projects, we will evaluate our results as best we may, each in our own way. There is no need to keep a constant check on others to see whether we ought to be doing more for them and less for ourselves.

The Ethics of the Hair Shirt

In stark contrast to the liberty-respecting view stands the idea that we are to count the satisfactions of others as equal in value to our own. If I can create a little more pleasure for some stranger by spending my dollar on him than I would create for myself by spending it on an ice cream cone, I then have a putative *obligation* to spend it on him. Thus

I am to continually defer to others in the organization of my activities, and shall be assailed by guilt whenever I am not bending my energies to the relief of those allegedly less fortunate than I. Benefit others, at the expense of yourself—and keep doing it until you are as poor and miserable as those whose poverty and misery you are supposed to be relieving! That is the ethics of the hair shirt.

How should we react to this idea? Negatively, in my view—and, I think, in yours. Doesn't that view really make us the slaves of the (supposedly) less well off? Surely a rule of conduct that permits people to be themselves and to try to live the best and most interesting lives they can is better than one which makes us all, in effect, functionaries in a welfare state? The rule that neither the rich nor the poor ought to be enslaved by the others is surely the better rule. Some, of course, think that the poor are, inherently, the "slaves" of the rich, and the rich inherently their masters. Such is the Marxist line, for instance. It's an important argument, but it's important also to realize that it's simply wrong. The wealthy do not have the right to hold a gun to the head of the nonwealthy and tell them what to do. On the contrary, the wealthy, in countries with reasonably free economies, become wealthy by selling things to others, things that those others voluntarily purchase. This makes the purchaser better off as well as the seller; and of course the employees of the latter become better off in the process of making those things, via their wages. The result of this activity is that there are more goods in the world than there would otherwise be.

This is precisely the opposite of the way the thief makes his money. He expends time and energy depriving someone else, involuntarily, of what his victims worked to produce, rather than devoting his own energies to productive activities. He in consequence leaves the world poorer than it was before he set out on his exploitative ways. The Marxist assimilates the honest accumulator to the thief. Rather than being, as so many seem to think, a profound contribution to social theory, that is a first-rank conceptual error, a failure to appreciate that wealth comes about precisely because of the prohibition of theft, rather than by its wholesale exercise.

Mutual Aid

But the anti-welfarist idea can be taken too far as well. Should people be disposed to assist each other in time of need? Certainly! But the appropriate rule for this is not that each person is duty-bound to minister to the poor until he himself is a pauper or near-pauper as well.

Rather, the appropriate rule is what the characterization, "in time of need" more nearly suggests. There are indeed emergencies in life when a modest effort by someone will do a great deal for someone else. People who aren't ready to help others are people who deserve to be avoided when they themselves turn to others in time of need.

But this all assumes that these occasions are, in the first place, relatively unusual, and in the second, that the help offered is genuinely of modest cost to the provider. If a stranger on the street asks for directions, a trifling expenditure of time and effort saves him great frustration, and perhaps also makes for a pleasant encounter with another human (which that other human should try to make so, by being polite and saying "thanks!" for example). But if as I walk down the street I am accosted on all sides by similar requests, then I shall never get my day's work done if I can't just say, "Sorry, I've got to be going!" or merely ignore the questioners and walk right on. If instead I must minister to each, then soon there will be nothing to give, since its existence depends entirely on the activities of people who produce it. If the stranger asks me to drive him around town all day looking for a long-lost friend, for instance, then that's going too far. Though of course we should be free to help him out even to that extent, if we are so inclined.

What about parting with the means for making your sweet little daughter's birthday party a memorable one, in order to keep a dozen strangers alive on the other side of the world? Is this something you are morally required to do? Indeed not. She may well *matter* to you more than they. This illustrates again the fact that people do *not* "count equally" for most of us. Normal people care more about some people than others, and build their very lives around those carings. It is both absurd and very arrogant for theorists, talking airily about the equality of all people, to insist on cramming it down our throats—which is how ordinary people do see it.

It is reasonable, then, to arrive at a general understanding that we shall be ready to help when help is urgent and when giving it is not very onerous to us. But a general understanding that we shall help everyone as if they were our spouses or dearest friends is quite another matter. Only a thinker whose heart has been replaced by a calculating machine could suppose that to be reasonable.

Is There a Duty of Charity?

One of the good things we can do in life is to make an effort to care about people about whom we don't ordinarily care or think. This can

benefit not only the intended beneficiaries in distant places, but it can also benefit you, by broadening your perspective. There is a place for the enlargement of human sympathies. But then, these are sympathies, matters of the heart; and for such matters, family, friends, colleagues, and co-workers in things are rightly first on your agenda. Why so? First, just because you are you and not somebody else—not, for example, a godlike “impartial observer.” But there is another reason of interest, even if you think there is something right about the utilitarian view. This is what amounts to a consideration of *efficiency*. We know ourselves and our loved ones; we do not, by definition, know strangers. We can choose a gift for people we know and love, but are we wise to try to benefit someone of alien culture and diet? If we do a good thing for someone we know well, we make an investment that will be returned as the years go by; but we have little idea of the pay-off from charity for the unknown. Of course, that can be overcome, once in awhile—you might end up pen pals with a peasant in Guatemala, but it would not be wise to count on it.

The tendency and desire to do good for others is a virtue. And it is a *moral* virtue, for we all have an interest in the general acquisition of this quality. Just as anyone can kill anyone else, so anyone can benefit anyone else; and so long as the cost to oneself of participating in the general scheme of helpfulness is low—namely, decidedly less than the return—then it is worth it. But it is not reasonable to take the matter beyond that. In particular, it is not reasonable to become a busybody, or a fanatic like Dickens' character Mrs. Jellyby, who is so busy with her charitable work for the natives in darkest Africa that her own children run around in rags and become the terror of the neighbourhood. Nor is it reasonable to be so concerned for the welfare of distant persons that you resort to armed robbery in your efforts to help them out (“Stick 'em up! I'm collecting for Oxfam!”).

Notes on the Real World

If we are persuaded by the above, then as decent human beings we will be concerned about starvation and inclined to do something to help out if we can. This raises two questions. First, what is the situation? Are there lots of people in danger of imminent demise from lack of food? And second, just what should we do about it if there are?

Regarding the first question, one notes that contemporary philosophers and many others talk as though the answer is obviously and overwhelmingly in the affirmative. They write as though people

by the million are starving daily. It is of interest to realize that they are, generally speaking, wrong, and in the special cases where there really is hunger, its causes are such as to strikingly affect our answer to the second question.

It turns out that starvation in the contemporary world is *not at all* due to the world's population having outgrown its resources, as Garrett Hardin and so many others seem to think; nor is the world even remotely a “lifeboat,” as implied by the title of a famous article by Onora O'Neill (“Lifeboat Earth”). In fact, it has come to be appreciated that the world can support an indefinite number of people, certainly vastly more than there are now. If people have more children, they can be fed, or at least there is no reason why they couldn't be, so far as the actual availability of resources is concerned; nor does anyone in the affluent part of the world need to give up eating meat in order to enable them to do so. In 1970, harbingers of gloom and doom on these matters were reporting that by the 1990s there would be massive starvation in the world unless we got to work right now, clamping birth-control measures on the recalcitrant natives. Now in 1992 there are perhaps a half-billion more people than there were then, and—surprise!—they're all eating, and eating better at that. All, that is, *except* for those being starved at gunpoint by their governments or warring political factions. Meanwhile, Western nations are piling up food surpluses and wondering what to do to keep their farmers from going broke for lack of demand for their burgeoning products.

In fact, all of the incidence of substantial starvation (as opposed to the occasional flood) has been due to politics, not agriculture. In several African countries, in Nicaragua for awhile, in China until not long ago, the regimes in power, propelled by ideology or a desire for cheap votes, imposed artificially low food prices or artificially inefficient agricultural systems, on their people, and thus provided remarkably effective disincentives to their farmers to grow food. Not surprisingly, they responded by not growing it. The cure is to let the farmers farm in peace, and charge whatever they like for their produce; it is astonishing how rapidly they will then proceed to grow food to meet the demand. But the cure isn't to have Western countries send over boatloads of Western wheat. Even if the local government will *let* people have this bounty (they often don't—corrupt officials have been known to go out and privately resell the grain elsewhere instead of distributing it to their starving subjects), providing it indiscriminately hooks them on Western charity instead of enabling them to regain the self-sufficiency they enjoyed in earlier times, before modern Western

benefits like "democracy" enabled incompetent local governments to disrupt the food supply.

We must also mention countries with governments that drive people forcibly off their land, burn their crops, and at a minimum steal it from the peasantry, as in Ethiopia and Somalia (at the time of this writing). Governments in those countries have combined such barbarities with the familiar tendency to prevent Western aid from getting to its intended recipients. Nature has nothing to do with starvation in such cases, and improvements in agriculture are not the cure. Improvements in politics are—but will not soon be coming, we may be sure. This means that the would-be charitable person faces a pretty difficult problem when he turns to the second question: What to do? In cases of natural disaster, as when a huge flood inundates the coast of Bangladesh, there will be short-term problems, and charitable agencies are excellent at responding quickly with needed food and medical supplies. Supporting some of those for dealing with such emergencies is likely a good idea. But in many other cases, there is very little that an outside agency can do. Tinpot Marxist dictators are not exactly paradigm cases of sweet reason at work, and only governments normally have the kind of clout that can open doors, even a crack, to the sort of aid we might like to give their beleaguered peoples.

The American Peace Corps and CUSO are two interesting organizations whose enthusiastic volunteers go to "third-world" communities to try to help them in various ways. To what extent they succeed is very hard to say, especially because the fundamental question of what constitutes "help" is so hard to answer. Do we help a native tribe in Africa that has maintained its way of life for thousands of years when we get their children learning arithmetic and wearing jeans? Or do we only destroy what they have and replace it with something impossible for them to cope with? (As a sobering case in point, the travel-writer Dervla Murphy, in *Muddling Through in Madagascar*, describes how one community was given an efficient modern pump for its communal water supply, which provided lots of clean water and relieved people of long trips to polluted wells. It stopped some years later, by which time the people who installed it had long since gone, and nobody knew how to repair it. But, interestingly, they didn't seem terribly concerned about it and made no effort whatever to get someone to fix it, but simply went back to the old ways, uncomplainingly and inefficiently. Apparently *they* didn't realize how terribly "essential" was this pump. Do we really know better than they? Why are we so sure that we do?)

Helping people who are very different from us is not an easy matter. Did all those missionaries who descended on the hapless Africans in the past centuries do them a lot of good by teaching them Christianity, or by bringing the infant mortality rate way down so that families accustomed to having a manageable number of children surviving to maturity suddenly found themselves with six or seven mouths to feed instead of two? Or by building a road to enable tourists to drive up to the villages and give the natives all sorts of Western diseases for which their immune systems were totally unprepared? There is surely a real question here for thoughtful people. Our efforts could well create disasters for the people we are trying to help, as well as to impose pointless costs on ourselves.

The sober conclusion from all this is that maybe it's better on all counts to spend that money on the opera after all. We are unlikely to act well when we act in ignorance, and when we deal with people vastly different from ourselves, ignorance is almost certain to afflict our efforts.

Summing Up

The basic question of this chapter is whether the hungry have a positive right to be fed. Of course we have a right to feed them if we wish, and they have a negative right to be fed. But may we forcibly impose a duty on others to feed them? We may not. If the fact that others are starving is not our fault, then we do not need to provide for them as a duty of justice. To think otherwise is to suppose that we are, in effect, slaves to the badly off. And so we can in good conscience spend our money on the opera instead of on the poor. Even so, feeding the hungry and taking care of the miserable is a nice thing to do, and is morally recommended. Charity is a virtue. Moreover, starvation turns out to be almost entirely a function of bad governments, rather than nature's inability to accommodate the burgeoning masses. Our charitable instincts can handle easily the problems that are due to natural disaster. We can feed the starving *and* go to the opera!

Suggestions for Further Reading

Three anthologies provide a wide range of views on this subject: William Aiken and Hugh LaFollette, eds., *World Hunger and Moral Obligation* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977); George R. Lucas, Jr., ed., *Lifeboat Ethics*