How Not To Justify Starvation

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World hunger is undeniably a serious political, pragmatic, and moral issue. We know that scores of people are dying of malnutrition and related disorders. The question is--what are we doing about it?

The moral question concerning world starvation is particularly perplexing. The humanitarian impulse to relieve suffering leads many to conclude rather quickly, and often nonrefelectively, that we have obligation to feed the starving populations of third world nations. This appears even more imperative since currently only one-third of the world's population live in comparatively rich nations while two-thirds are desperately poor. Egoists, social Darwinists, and amoralists have produced predictable counters to this type of claim, typically denying the existence of any obligation of this type. Perhaps the most interesting challenge to the claim that the affluent have an obligation to share their riches with the starving is a moral argument from the same premise, viz., the reduction of suffering. The basic argument is that it would be foolish and ultimately counterproductive for rich nations to share their surplus with poor nations. Such sharing would do no good in the long run due to growing populations and imprudent behavior on the part of the inhabitants of poorer nations. As a consequence of sharing, the environment would be overloaded, feeding those currently starving would lead to even more severe demands in the future, and ultimately suffering would increase rather than decease.

Perhaps the most interesting specimen of this type of argument appears in Garret Hardin's "Lifeboat Ethics."[1] Hardin argues that programs such as the World Food Bank are akin to a nutritional "commons," and that policies of sharing would be disastrous for both the affluent who inhabit the "lifeboat" and the poor who are foundering in a "sea of hunger."

Arguments such as Hardin's are consequentialist in nature. The following remark, concerning the World Food Bank, is representative of his position: "We must ask if such a program would actually do more good than harm, not only momentarily but in the long run."[2] He subsequently adds, "the real question is, what are the operational consequences of establishing a world food bank? . . . In the short run, a world food bank would diminish [the need for food on the part of the starving], but in the long run it would actually increase the need without limit."[3] What is worse, say Hardin, is that if we share our resources with (e.g.) India,

"However humanitarian our intent, every Indian life saved through medical or nutritional assistance from abroad diminishes the quality of life for those who remain, and for subsequent generations."[4]

So Hardin's position is this--even though it is true that many will currently suffer if we in the affluent nations refuse to share our nutritional and medical resources, this will be outweighed in the long run by even more suffering which will result from a policy of sharing. The claim is that we have an obligation to perform that act (or implement that policy) which will have the best overall consequences. Although refusing to share our resources with the needy will undoubtedly produce negative consequences for those who will go hungry, the claim is that even more horrible consequences will ensue if we share our resources.

Surely this type of argument will not be convincing to a nonconsequentialist such as a Kantian, who might hold that it is wrong knowingly to allow someone to die. And surely it could also be argued that a plea of ignorance of the effects of one's action or the lack of intent to harm does not eradicate the responsibility to render aid to those in such desparate need.

I shall attempt to meet Hardin-type arguments on their own grounds by arguing that the overall consequences of sharing will be better than those of not sharing.

First, we must clear up some common misconceptions about the "food crisis." It is simply false that the current food supply is inadequate for feeding the world's current population. According to former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, Bob Berglund, the food supply of the last twenty years could have provided more than an adequate number of calories for each person, *if it were equally distributed.*[5] Thus the problem is not one of scarcity, but rather one of distribution. Those in affluent nations have much more than an adequate food supply while those in poorer nations go hungry. Still, however, food is a limited resource, especially over the long haul, so the question remains--how, morally speaking, are we best to utilize it?

Nor is it simply a question of callous inaction on the one hand and simple food giveaways on the other. One lesson to be learned from arguments like Hardin's is that any program of assistance should include not just food to be consumed today but assistance designed to allow poorer nations to become more self-sufficient, and perhaps some *proviso* tied to population stabilization.

There is certainly the *prima facie* case to be made that in view of population demographics, which indicate that those suffering the effects of malnutrition outnumber those who are affluent and have resources to share, there is the moral obligation for the affluent to share their resources with the needy. Moreover, the fact that in the future it is reasonable to predict that the ratio of havenots to haves will only increase makes the case stronger.

Thus the argument against sharing resources might rely on some premise like

this--starvation is a means of population control, and although many will suffer death and disease from malnutrition, the benefits enjoyed by those who have adequate or more than adequate resources outweigh this suffering. However, the claim need not be as strong as asserting a net balance of beneficial consequences. What is necessary is the weaker claim that nonsharing is the best policy in the long run. More succinctly, the balance of good over bad consequences of nonsharing must be more favorable than those of any other option. This is the claim upon which I shall attempt to cast some serious doubts.

There is a preliminary counter to this type of move. Following respectable consequentialists such as Bentham and Mill, one might claim that death and even disease associated with malnutrition are so ghastly that there is a presumption, however rebuttable, against permitting this type of consequence for the purpose of promoting some other "positive good." It should be unarguable that culinary excesses such as calorie-laden desserts do not outweigh brain damage in any reasonable utility calculus.

This intuitively obvious point can indeed be provided with some further justification. The type of argument I have in mind is roughly this. On any reasonable consequentialist grounds, limited resources such as food conform to something like a "law of diminishing return," such that the consumption of food by those already adequately fed produces less good than consumption of food by those who are malnourished. One cannot simply equate the good produced by a given quantity of food when consumed by an adequately nourished or overnourished individual to the good produced when the same quantity of food is consumed by someone whose survival or well-being would be threatened if this food were not consumed. Food whose consumption has the effect of keeping its consumers alive and healthy, and whose consumption is necessary for their survival and health, simply produces more good than food which is consumed as a luxury item, and in whose absence its consumers can live healthy lives, at least regarding their nutritional needs.

The concept of diminishing return is certainly not alien to economists, and has even been utilized in discussion of how best to utilize scarce resources. The idea is that the curve representing the return on one's expenditure of a resource will eventually "flatten out," so that if the benefits of expending a quantity y of some resource is calculable as x, the return from expending a quantity $2y$. It is also arguable that for some items, the rate of return is inversely proportional to the amount expended, so that if a quantity $4y$ is invested, the return will be even less than the sum of "$2x + 2x$." Of course not all resources conform to this model, and even for those that do, the rate at which return diminishes may vary. The relevant point is that the benefit derived from some resources is not strictly additive. This becomes especially crucial when dealing with distribution of resources. Leaving

aside generic difficulties associated with interpersonal utility comparisons, the point would be that the aggregate benefit from Jones utilizing four units of a resource and Smith utilizing two units is not necessarily equal to the aggregate benefit from Jones and Smith each utilizing three units, since return can diminish as rate of consumption increases.

Consumption of food appears to conform to something like a law of diminishing returns. A midnight snack consumed by a well-fed American merely satisfies his culinary desires, whereas the same meal would no doubt taste at least as appetizing to a starving child in Biafra, and would have the added benefit of alleviating his starvation, and preventing related maladies. The overall picture should now be clear. The excess calories consumed by affluent persons produce a smaller benefit that if they were consumed by those who need those calories for survival. And certainly the fact that excess calories are consumed by at least some in affluent nations is unassailable. One need only cite Jane Fonda, Vic Tanny or Richard Simmons in order to document truly wasted calories.

The problem is worse than it first appears, since our eating habits themselves are major contributors to this problem. The fact that we raise animals for slaughter is a particularly inefficient use of food resources. If we stopped feeding grain, soybeans, and fish meal to pigs and cattle (the most inefficient sources of animal protein), the amount of food saved would, if distributed properly, be more than enough to end world hunger. Unless one is prepared to argue that the amount of good produced by consuming one gram of steak protein is equivalent to that that would be produced by the consumption of the 22 grams of grain protein required to produce it, then as long as there are starving people in the world, some of our most cherished and sacrosanct dining habits constitute a paradigm case of diminished return from food resources.

If what I have said is correct, then consequentialist arguments in favor of not sharing food resources need to be reassessed in light of how the benefits of consumption vary with the rate of per capita consumption. I would suggest that we do have options which are morally preferable to allowing people to starve. We need to help those in underdeveloped nations to be come more self-sufficient, encourage or even require that spiraling populations be brought under control, and realize that we have every reason to treat food as a limited resource.

Finally, we must be careful in weighing the benefits and costs of our patterns of consumption and distribution of this resource in order accurately to assess the long-term consequences of our policies.

NOTES

1.Garrett Hardin, "Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor," reprinted in *Morality In Practice*, Sterba (ed.), Wadsworth, 1984, pp. 73-79.
2.Hardin, p. 76.
3.Hardin, pp. 76-77.
4.Hardin, p. 78.
5.Bob Bergland, "Attacking the Problem of World Hunger," *The National Forum* (1979), vol. 69, no. 2, p. 4.