

Should we let people starve – for now?

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Many philosophers believe that just as moral reasons do not diminish in force across space, so they do not diminish across time, and that we should

accordingly be neutral between the interests of present people and future people. This allows them to make the plausible claim that we should not discount the interests of future generations when making decisions about things like consuming scarce resources.¹ However, when this outlook is combined with a small number of fairly weak assumptions, it becomes difficult to resist answering the title question in the affirmative.² By analogy, it also becomes hard to deny that we should delay aid intended to prevent suffering short of death as well. Although I will be arguing that we should take this view seriously, my goal is to explain it, not to vindicate it.

Suppose that:

- (1) Future lives count just as much as present lives; preventing future deaths is just as important as preventing present-time deaths.
- (2) There will continue to be at-risk people in developing countries whose lives we could save by contributing to aid organizations in the foreseeable future.
- (3) The real cost of providing life-saving aid will decrease over time.
- (4) There are methods of increasing our wealth (in real terms) over time.
- (5) It would often benefit us to delay providing aid.

In the spirit of armchair philosophy, I will do little to defend the empirical assumptions (2)–(5). Instead, I will briefly explicate them, and then say how, in different ways, they serve to push us toward the affirmative answer. I will say even less about (1), which is simply a widely accepted premiss, partly for reasons described in the first paragraph.

For simplicity's sake let us focus on those dying relatively easily preventable deaths in the developing world whom we could save with aid.³

¹ See, e.g. Parfit 1984, Appendix F and Kavka 1978, building on the work of Ramsey 1928 and Sidgwick 1907: 414. I am using 'discount the interests' here to refer to the question of whether future people count as much as present people, not the various distinct issues economists sometimes lump under the heading of 'social discount rate'. We may, for instance, be justified in discounting the impact of environmental damage to future generations because those generations will be better off or because of various uncertainties, but that is not to say that future people count less. Parfit discusses this point at length.

² In the light of the fairly quick route to the affirmative, and the weakness of the assumptions, it is surprising that this question is not discussed in major works on the ethics of aid, such as Cullity 2004 and Unger 1995, or in discussions of 'moral distance', such as the papers collected in Chatterjee 2003. The nearest approach is the work of Landesman 1995 (see below).

³ What is a 'relatively easily preventable' death? I have in mind deaths from disease or malnutrition that could be prevented by low-cost measures – not deaths which could only be prevented with brain surgery.

The second assumption (2) just says that the problem of widespread preventable death will not disappear in the near future; we have not reached the point at which we need worry about these being the last few years in which people will die in ways we could prevent with comparative ease by making contributions to various organizations. This assumption has been denied by optimists like Jeffrey Sachs, who proposes eliminating most preventable deaths in the developing world within several decades. But this optimistic outlook has been criticized by other economists on several grounds, including the dismal results of quite similar ‘big push’ movements in the past. As these critics point out, the \$2.3 trillion spent on aid in the last fifty years alone has made no significant dent in the ongoing problem, which suggests that the assumption is not unreasonable, even if nations like the United States were to embrace the large-scale plans Sachs outlines.⁴

The third assumption is that the products and services which are used to help at-risk populations – oral rehydration packets, AIDS medicines, vaccines, the construction of wells, transport of food staples by plane or ship, etc. – will come to be cheaper in real terms. A reason for thinking this to be so is that as products and services that were once high-margin innovations become commodities, their price rapidly falls. And since advanced medicines, transport systems, and many of the other products and services that are utilized to provide aid fall into this category, it seems reasonable to imagine that the real cost of saving human lives in the developing world conditions we have stipulated will fall.⁵ Of course, there is no guarantee that things will turn out that way. Perhaps rising oil prices or labour costs will keep the relevant items expensive. But these dangers (or others like them) always threaten the falling price of high-margin items, yet the trend seems borne out often enough all the same.

The fourth assumption should be obvious: although there is some risk involved in making money from money, depositing money in a government-insured bank will usually generate wealth, and doing so is unlikely to pose a financial hazard in the foreseeable future.

⁴ Sachs’s views are expounded in 2005a, though in 2005b he seems to concede that little progress has been made toward meeting the goals he sets out. William Easterly criticizes Sachs’s work as ‘utopian social engineering’ in a book review 2005a, and in a more technical paper 2005b. Notice that it is even harder to imagine that lesser forms of suffering will disappear in the near future, and the same arguments support delaying aid to relieve suffering.

⁵ That is not to say that saving lives in general will become cheaper, alas. That is unlikely ever to happen in the developed world, since there will always be room for pushing the limits of who can be saved under what circumstances by new and expensive technologies.

Finally, we are often better off giving \$10 a year from now rather than the same inflation-adjusted amount today, since we can invest the money to our benefit. Once again there is the issue of risk, but certainly *we're* better off if we can give the same amount later rather than sooner.

So much for the assumptions. Now, when (1) and (2) are combined with *either* (3) or (4) we arrive at a case for delaying giving aid. For in that case we will be able to save more people in the future with the money we are now contemplating giving away than we can save right now. Whether the reason is that the same money will go further in the future (assumption 3) or whether I will simply have more money available (assumption 4), either way, my \$100 may save X people today, but it will save more in the future. All I need do is place my money in an interest-bearing account and will all proceeds to an aid organization. But of course *both* (3) and (4) seem fairly plausible, and if both are true, then this argument becomes that much stronger: if only we delay giving money today, we can save more people later by giving more aid that will go further in the future. Giving now thus involves a large (and lethal) opportunity cost. Hence we should let people starve now in order to save more people later, runs the argument.

Assumption (5) raises a separate but related issue. It implies that by delaying giving aid we might do both good and well, as the expression goes. The above argument shows that delaying may be better from the point of view of saving more people; assumption (5) indicates that delaying is better from the point of view of self-interest as well. To illustrate, suppose that you are contemplating giving away a million dollars. It so happens that there is a mansion available that you have reason to believe will prove an appreciating asset. If you delay giving, you can buy the mansion, live in it for 30 years, and then will the money from the sale to charity. Everybody wins: since your asset predictably appreciated, you saved more lives than if you had given right away, and you got to live in a mansion for years. (High brows can produce their own example involving, say, investing in art.) More prosaically, if we invest our money, we can give the inflation-adjusted amount (or more) later and reap whatever profits are left over.⁶ There is, admittedly, the issue of risk. Real estate can go bust. The art-market can collapse. But these risks may well be matched by prospects. Exhaustive analysis of certain real-estate investments may

⁶ There are really four things we might do: (1) we could give only the inflation-adjusted amount later and keep the profits for ourselves; (2) we could delay giving and give *all* profits made by the delay to aid; (3) we could keep some of the delay-profits for ourselves but give the rest to aid; or (4) we could pursue the mansion strategy and both benefit from the delay and give away all of the proceeds from our appreciated investment. Clearly these various options differ in their tendency to promote doing 'well' versus doing 'good.'

indicate that, on balance, investing is a better bet from the point of view of saving lives than giving now.

Consequentialists are likely to find the argument worrisome, since they tend to champion the impartialist assumptions that give it force.⁷ But notice that the argument is independent of consequentialism. Good deontologists and others who aren't worried about maximizing the good should still find the argument worrisome. Imagine following the beneficent rule, 'Give when you can save a life at little cost to yourself'. This principle doesn't say *when* you should give. And it's hard to see how a deontologist could resist a subsidiary principle along the lines, 'When you intend to provide a fixed amount of aid to strangers to whom you have no special, agent-relative obligations, distribute aid in such a way as to help the most'. One need not be a consequentialist to find something odd in a Kantian's proposal to donate \$100 to a famine relief organization she happens to know is especially inefficient when there is a more efficient organization that will save more people standing by. The point, of course, is that by delaying aid, the Kantian donor will do more good. Naturally the deontologist will want to insist on her prerogative to direct resources in sub-optimal ways, for instance by lavishing care on her comparatively unworthy relatives. But unless she can claim that she stands in some special relationship to *present* strangers in which she does not stand to *future* strangers, this doesn't matter.⁸

A concern we may have about the argument is that it can seem to show not just that we should delay giving, but that we should delay giving *indefinitely*, since the cost of life-saving interventions will continue to decrease, there will always be more wealth to be accumulated, and our descendants or others will continue to benefit from delaying.⁹ But notice that assumption (2) may well fail in the nearish future. It would be unduly pessimistic to deny all hope that easily preventable deaths largely *will* be prevented sometime in the next few centuries, and the above argument only applies if we are confident that there will

⁷ *Anti-consequentialists* sometimes say that some versions of consequentialism, especially utilitarianism, have difficulty explaining why painless deaths should matter. But utilitarians themselves rarely take the view that painless deaths aren't worth preventing, either because they embrace preference utilitarianism or by appealing to indirect effects; see Singer 1993: ch. 4. Also, even the crudest utilitarian cares about reducing suffering, and the argument applies in that context as well.

⁸ Obviously I have only given a very crude sketch of how a deontologist might reason about these matters. For a sophisticated, sustained discussion of a Kantian approach to aid, see O'Neill 1986: chs. 7–8.

⁹ This is closely related to the worry pursued by Landesman 1995 in relation to when a utilitarian should dissolve a trust. See also McNamara 1995.

continue to be a supply of suitable aid-recipients.¹⁰ Also, at some point the risk that our contribution will not go to aid the needy becomes quite large. If I place money in a bank and write a will that stipulates the money go to UNICEF, I have good reason to be highly confident that my intentions will be fulfilled. But it's much harder to have such confidence when creating a trust that is to pay out a thousand years from now, or whenever an executor judges the time is ripe. In these far-fetched scenarios the risk that I will fail to aid anyone at all rises dramatically. And unlike the short-term risk of delay, in which we can have some confidence about the good we might accomplish by taking the risk, we have no idea what we might accomplish by indefinite or long-term delay; we can estimate that in several decades need for aid will vastly outstrip supply, but we have no idea what good we might accomplish by taking the risk of long-term delay. And, finally, we may be risk-averse when it comes to altruism. Faced with the choice of saving a 100 people for certain or a 50% chance of saving 201 people, we may prefer the former. If this is how we feel, we might be persuaded to delay giving for some time, but perhaps not for a thousand years – whatever the pay-off. I have no ambition to settle this issue, however, and am willing to grant that indefinite delay might in principle turn out to be the most plausible consequence of these arguments, though the considerations just adduced at least seem to show it isn't an obvious or immediate one, short of further, unworldly assumptions.

Another important issue to note is that saving present people may have a greater impact than saving future people, since a healthier, more productive present means a better-off future.¹¹ Part of the *reason* we have to believe members of certain societies will be badly off in the future is that so many of the present generation die or fall ill and are thus unable to foster a productive economy. By saving in the present we will be indirectly saving members of future generations as well, and the earlier we intervene the greater the benefit for posterity. At best, though, this simply gives us a reason to revise upward the costs of delay. The costs of

¹⁰ ‘One might have thought that the point about saving at-risk people from death is just an instance of a more general point about delaying aid. Surely the argument could have been focused on preventing poverty and inequality. But short of a Marxist utopia surely inequalities can be expected to persist so that we will, as Jesus says, always have the poor among us. So doesn't this reply fail for nearby cases like poverty?’ Inequalities will no doubt persist, but many moral theories don't require us to remove *all* inequalities. It's reasonable to hope we will raise everyone's well-being to a certain threshold, and we might deny that it is important to raise welfare once that threshold has been reached, however unequal things are. This is the sufficiency theory of just distribution. See Frankfurt 1987 and Crisp 2003.

¹¹ Arudra Burra emphasized this point to me.

delaying are the deaths we could prevent by giving now plus the future deaths that could be averted by giving now (or a subtler sum involving probabilities). And these costs might still be outweighed by the benefits of delaying. Notice, too, that that the posterity effect just described often doesn't apply, as when we give toward short-term disaster relief in an otherwise robust society. And then, the effect we are discussing is a fairly nebulous one. Clearly we should discount for its uncertainty, just as we should take into account the risks associated with delayed aid. In the absence of empirical investigation, we have only a reasonable-sounding hypothesis, and it is hard to say whether it might not turn out to be false for all sorts of reasons. For instance, it is not hard to imagine circumstances in which the deaths of vulnerable members of a society might actually have a positive effect on future generations because of attendant changes in the birth-rate, a relieving of the welfare system, and so on. (Of course, these would not be good reasons not to help the worst-off; they would merely show that delaying need not indirectly harm posterity.) Here, too, however, I don't mean to settle anything. Much more detailed empirical investigation would be required to be confident about these matters.

But I suspect that the worries raised so far aren't at the heart of most people's resistance to the affirmative answer. The real worries most people have about delayed giving, I conjecture, are twofold. First, it seems more *urgent* to save people who are dying *now*, just as it seems to some people more urgent to save disaster victims who are nearby strangers than faraway strangers.¹² Second, it seems complacent and cruel to sit in our million-dollar mansion letting people starve while telling ourselves it's all for the best. The first worry is just an expression of the unease we have with (1). It's much harder than is sometimes appreciated to take seriously the notion that moral reasons aren't attenuated over time. Here, as in other contexts, there is an unwelcome side to impartiality. I won't, however, say more about this than to note that any progress we make by convincing ourselves that the present lives are deserving more urgent consideration will inevitably make it difficult to solve the more familiar problems involving scarce resources and future generations. The second worry is one a virtue theorist might raise. Can any decent person sit in a mansion and watch as the present generation dies so that future persons can be saved? But this is no different from asking whether any decent person could refuse to save a man drowning before his eyes in order to go and save two

¹² See Chatterjee 2003 for views for and against the significance of distance for moral decision-making.

drowning people down the road. And that sort of choice often seems permissible. In a world of cruel choices it is unclear that this is not the least cruel.

Publicizing these ideas might even do some good. Incessant appeals to give more now have had little effect in comparison to the magnitude of the relevant problems. Perhaps appeals *not* to give now, but rather to invest in appreciating assets which are willed to aid would be more successful. If each succeeding generation were moved to do this there might even arise a revolving-door effect so that the present needy would be taken care of by the heightened (testamental) generosity and appreciated wealth of the previous generation.¹³

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¹³ This paper was written while on a Greenwall Fellowship at the Berman Institute for Bioethics of Johns Hopkins University. I am grateful for this support.