

# THE LIFE YOU CAN SAVE

How to Do Your Part  
to End World Poverty

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## Preface

When he saw the man fall onto the subway tracks, Wesley Autry didn't hesitate. With the lights of the oncoming train visible, Autry, a construction worker, jumped down to the tracks and pushed the man down into a drainage trench between the rails, covering him with his own body. The train passed over them, leaving a trail of grease on Autry's cap. Autry, later invited to the State of the Union Address and praised by the president for his bravery, downplayed his actions: "I don't feel like I did something spectacular. I just saw someone who needed help. I did what I felt was right."<sup>1</sup>

What if I told you that you, too, can save a life, even many lives? Do you have a bottle of water or a can of soda on the table beside you as you read this book? If you are paying for something to drink when safe drinking water comes out of the tap, you have money to spend on things you don't really need. Around the world, a billion people struggle to live each day on less than you paid for that drink. Because they can't afford even the most basic health care for their families, their children may die from simple, easily treatable diseases like diarrhea. You can help them, and you don't have to risk getting hit by an oncoming train to do it.

I have been thinking and writing for more than thirty years about how we should respond to hunger and poverty. I have presented this book's argument to thousands of students in my university classes and in lectures around the world, and to countless others in newspapers, magazines, and television programs. As a result, I've been forced to respond to a wide range

of thoughtful challenges. This book represents my effort to distill what I've learned about why we give, or don't give, and what we should do about it.

We live in a unique moment. The proportion of people unable to meet their basic physical needs is smaller today than it has been at any time in recent history, and perhaps at any time since humans first came into existence. At the same time, when we take a long-term perspective that sees beyond the fluctuations of the economic cycle, the proportion of people with far more than they need is also unprecedented. Most important, rich and poor are now linked in ways they never were before. Moving images, in real time, of people on the edge of survival are beamed into our living rooms. Not only do we know a lot about the desperately poor, but we also have much more to offer them in terms of better health care, improved seeds and agricultural techniques, and new technologies for generating electricity. More amazing, through instant communications and open access to a wealth of information that surpasses the greatest libraries of the pre-Internet age, we can enable them to join the worldwide community—if only we can help them get far enough out of poverty to seize the opportunity.

Economist Jeffrey Sachs has argued convincingly that extreme poverty can be virtually eliminated by the middle of this century. We are already making progress. In 1960, according to UNICEF, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 20 million children died before their fifth birthday because of poverty. In 2007, UNICEF announced that, for the first time since record keeping began, the number of deaths of young children has fallen below 10 million a year.<sup>2</sup> Public health campaigns against smallpox, measles, and malaria have contributed to the drop in child mortality, as has economic progress in several countries. The drop is even more impressive because the world's population has more than doubled since 1960. Yet we can't become complacent: 9.7 mil-

lion children under five still die annually; this is an immense tragedy, not to mention a moral stain on a world as rich as this one. And the combination of economic uncertainty and volatile food prices that marked 2008 could still reverse the downward trend in poverty-related deaths.

We can liken our situation to an attempt to reach the summit of an immense mountain. For all the eons of human existence, we have been climbing up through dense cloud. We haven't known how far we have to go, nor whether it is even possible to get to the top. Now at last we have emerged from the mist and can see a route up the remaining steep slopes and onto the summit ridge. The peak still lies some distance ahead. There are sections of the route that will challenge our abilities to the utmost, but we can see that the ascent is feasible.

We can, each of us, do our part in this epoch-making climb. In recent years there's been a good deal of coverage of some among the very rich who have taken on this challenge in a bold and public way. Warren Buffett has pledged to give \$31 billion, and Bill and Melinda Gates have given \$29 billion and are planning to give more.<sup>3</sup> Immense as these sums are, we will see by the end of this book that they are only a small fraction of what people in rich nations could easily give, without a significant reduction in their standard of living. We won't reach our goal unless many more contribute to the effort.

That's why this is the right time to ask yourself: What ought I be doing to help?

I write this book with two linked but significantly different goals. The first is to challenge you to think about our obligations to those trapped in extreme poverty. The part of the book that lays out this challenge will deliberately present a very demanding—some might even say impossible—standard of ethical behavior. I'll suggest that it may not be possible to consider ourselves to be living a morally good life unless we give a great deal more than most of us would think it realistic to expect

human beings to give. This may sound absurd, and yet the argument for it is remarkably simple. It goes back to that bottle of water, to the money we spend on things that aren't *really* necessary. If it is so easy to help people in real need through no fault of their own, and yet we fail to do so, aren't we doing something wrong? At a minimum, I hope this book will persuade you that there is something deeply askew with our widely accepted views about what it is to live a good life.

The second goal of this book is to convince you to choose to give more of your income to help the poor. You'll be happy to know that I fully realize the need to step back from the demanding standards of a philosophical argument to ask what will really make a difference in the way we act. I'll consider the reasons, some relatively convincing, others less so, that we offer for not giving, as well as the psychological factors that get in our way. I'll acknowledge the bounds of human nature and yet provide examples of people who seem to have found a way to push those bounds further than most. And I will close with a reasonable standard that, for 95 percent of Americans, can be met by giving no more than 5 percent of their income.

I should say up front that I believe you should be giving more than 5 percent, and that I hope you'll ultimately move in that direction. But that's not easy to hear and not easy to do. I recognize that most people aren't likely to be moved merely by philosophical argument to make drastic changes in the way they live, and, further, that one cannot make such drastic changes overnight. The ultimate purpose of this book is to reduce extreme poverty, not to make you feel guilty. So I'm going to advocate a standard that I'm confident will do a lot of good. That means suggesting a level that will get you started, and put you on a path toward challenging yourself and working toward doing more.

For reasons that I'll explore in this book, many of us find it difficult to consider giving money to people we've never met,

living in distant countries we've never visited. This obviously doesn't get any easier during periods of economic uncertainty, when many people are justifiably anxious about their own economic prospects. While I don't seek to diminish in any way the challenges that attend tough economic times, we should remember that even in the worst of times, our lives remain infinitely better than those of people living in extreme poverty. I'm hoping that you will look at the larger picture and think about what it takes to live ethically in a world in which 18 million people are dying unnecessarily each year. That's a higher annual death rate than in World War II. In the past twenty years alone, it adds up to more deaths than were caused by all the civil and international wars and government repression of the entire twentieth century, the century of Hitler and Stalin. How much would we give to prevent those horrors? Yet how little are we doing to prevent today's even larger toll, and all the misery that it involves? I believe that if you read this book to the end, and look honestly and carefully at our situation, assessing both the facts and the ethical arguments, you will agree that we must act.

PETER SINGER





## THE ARGUMENT



## 1. Saving a Child

On your way to work, you pass a small pond. On hot days, children sometimes play in the pond, which is only about knee-deep. The weather's cool today, though, and the hour is early, so you are surprised to see a child splashing about in the pond. As you get closer, you see that it is a very young child, just a toddler, who is flailing about, unable to stay upright or walk out of the pond. You look for the parents or babysitter, but there is no one else around. The child is unable to keep his head above the water for more than a few seconds at a time. If you don't wade in and pull him out, he seems likely to drown. Wading in is easy and safe, but you will ruin the new shoes you bought only a few days ago, and get your suit wet and muddy. By the time you hand the child over to someone responsible for him, and change your clothes, you'll be late for work. What should you do?

I teach a course called Practical Ethics. When we start talking about global poverty, I ask my students what they think you

should do in this situation. Predictably, they respond that you should save the child. “What about your shoes? And being late for work?” I ask them. They brush that aside. How could anyone consider a pair of shoes, or missing an hour or two at work, a good reason for not saving a child’s life?

In 2007, something resembling this hypothetical situation actually occurred near Manchester, England. Jordon Lyon, a ten-year-old boy, leaped into a pond after his stepsister Bethany slipped in. He struggled to support her but went under himself. Anglers managed to pull Bethany out, but by then Jordon could no longer be seen. They raised the alarm, and two police community support officers soon arrived; they refused to enter the pond to find Jordon. He was later pulled out, but attempts at resuscitation failed. At the inquest on Jordon’s death, the officers’ inaction was defended on the grounds that they had not been trained to deal with such situations. The mother responded: “If you’re walking down the street and you see a child drowning you automatically go in that water . . . You don’t have to be trained to jump in after a drowning child.”<sup>1</sup>

I think it’s safe to assume that most people would agree with the mother’s statement. But consider that, according to UNICEF, nearly 10 million children under five years old die each year from causes related to poverty. Here is just one case, described by a man in Ghana to a researcher from the World Bank:

Take the death of this small boy this morning, for example. The boy died of measles. We all know he could have been cured at the hospital. But the parents had no money and so the boy died a slow and painful death, not of measles but out of poverty.<sup>2</sup>

Think about something like that happening 27,000 times every day. Some children die because they don’t have enough to

eat. More die, like that small boy in Ghana, from measles, malaria, and diarrhea, conditions that either don't exist in developed nations, or, if they do, are almost never fatal. The children are vulnerable to these diseases because they have no safe drinking water, or no sanitation, and because when they do fall ill, their parents can't afford any medical treatment. UNICEF, Oxfam, and many other organizations are working to reduce poverty and provide clean water and basic health care, and these efforts are reducing the toll. If the relief organizations had more money, they could do more, and more lives would be saved.

Now think about your own situation. By donating a relatively small amount of money, you could save a child's life. Maybe it takes more than the amount needed to buy a pair of shoes—but we all spend money on things we don't really need, whether on drinks, meals out, clothing, movies, concerts, vacations, new cars, or house renovation. Is it possible that by choosing to spend your money on such things rather than contributing to an aid agency, you are leaving a child to die, a child you could have saved?

### *Poverty Today*

A few years ago, the World Bank asked researchers to listen to what the poor are saying. They were able to document the experiences of 60,000 women and men in seventy-three countries. Over and over, in different languages and on different continents, poor people said that poverty meant these things:

- You are short of food for all or part of the year, often eating only one meal per day, sometimes having to choose between stilling your child's hunger or your own, and sometimes being able to do neither.

- You can't save money. If a family member falls ill and you need money to see a doctor, or if the crop fails and you have nothing to eat, you have to borrow from a local moneylender and he will charge you so much interest as the debt continues to mount and you may never be free of it.
- You can't afford to send your children to school, or if they do start school, you have to take them out again if the harvest is poor.
- You live in an unstable house, made with mud or thatch that you need to rebuild every two or three years, or after severe weather.
- You have no nearby source of safe drinking water. You have to carry your water a long way, and even then, it can make you ill unless you boil it.

But extreme poverty is not only a condition of unsatisfied material needs. It is often accompanied by a degrading state of powerlessness. Even in countries that are democracies and are relatively well governed, respondents to the World Bank survey described a range of situations in which they had to accept humiliation without protest. If someone takes what little you have, and you complain to the police, they may not listen to you. Nor will the law necessarily protect you from rape or sexual harassment. You have a pervading sense of shame and failure because you cannot provide for your children. Your poverty traps you, and you lose hope of ever escaping from a life of hard work for which, at the end, you will have nothing to show beyond bare survival.<sup>3</sup>

The World Bank defines extreme poverty as not having enough income to meet the most basic human needs for adequate food, water, shelter, clothing, sanitation, health care, and education. Many people are familiar with the statistic that

1 billion people are living on less than one dollar per day. That was the World Bank's poverty line until 2008, when better data on international price comparisons enabled it to make a more accurate calculation of the amount people need to meet their basic needs. On the basis of this calculation, the World Bank set the poverty line at \$1.25 per day. The number of people whose income puts them under this line is not 1 billion but 1.4 billion. That there are more people living in extreme poverty than we thought is, of course, bad news, but the news is not all bad. On the same basis, in 1981 there were 1.9 billion people living in extreme poverty. That was about four in every ten people on the planet, whereas now fewer than one in four are extremely poor.

South Asia is still the region with the largest number of people living in extreme poverty, a total of 600 million, including 455 million in India. Economic growth has, however, reduced the proportion of South Asians living in extreme poverty from 60 percent in 1981 to 42 percent in 2005. There are another 380 million extremely poor people in sub-Saharan Africa, where half the population is extremely poor—and that is the same percentage as in 1981. The most dramatic reduction in poverty has been in East Asia, although there are still more than 200 million extremely poor Chinese, and smaller numbers elsewhere in the region. The remaining extremely poor people are distributed around the world, in Latin America and the Caribbean, the Pacific, the Middle East, North Africa, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia.<sup>4</sup>

In response to the "\$1.25 a day" figure, the thought may cross your mind that in many developing countries, it is possible to live much more cheaply than in the industrialized nations. Perhaps you have even done it yourself, backpacking around the world, living on less than you would have believed possible. So you may imagine that this level of poverty is less extreme than it would be if you had to live on that amount of

money in the United States, or any industrialized nation. If such thoughts did occur to you, you should banish them now, because the World Bank has already made the adjustment in purchasing power: Its figures refer to the number of people existing on a daily total consumption of goods and services—whether earned or home-grown—comparable to the amount of goods and services that can be bought in the United States for \$1.25.

In wealthy societies, most poverty is relative. People feel poor because many of the good things they see advertised on television are beyond their budget—but they do have a television. In the United States, 97 percent of those classified by the Census Bureau as poor own a color TV. Three quarters of them own a car. Three quarters of them have air-conditioning. Three quarters of them have a VCR or DVD player. All have access to health care.<sup>5</sup> I am not quoting these figures in order to deny that the poor in the United States face genuine difficulties. Nevertheless, for most, these difficulties are of a different order than those of the world's poorest people. The 1.4 billion people living in extreme poverty are poor by an absolute standard tied to the most basic human needs. They are likely to be hungry for at least part of each year. Even if they can get enough food to fill their stomachs, they will probably be malnourished because their diet lacks essential nutrients. In children, malnutrition stunts growth and can cause permanent brain damage. The poor may not be able to afford to send their children to school. Even minimal health care services are usually beyond their means.

This kind of poverty kills. Life expectancy in rich nations averages seventy-eight years; in the poorest nations, those officially classified as "least developed," it is below fifty.<sup>6</sup> In rich countries, fewer than one in a hundred children die before the age of five; in the poorest countries, one in five does. And to the UNICEF figure of nearly 10 million young children dying



every year from avoidable, poverty-related causes, we must add at least another 8 million older children and adults.<sup>7</sup>

### *Affluence Today*

Roughly matching the 1.4 billion people living in extreme poverty, there are about a billion living at a level of affluence never previously known except in the courts of kings and nobles. As king of France, Louis XIV, the “Sun King,” could afford to build the most magnificent palace Europe had ever seen, but he could not keep it cool in summer as effectively as most middle-class people in industrialized nations can keep their homes cool today. His gardeners, for all their skill, were unable to produce the variety of fresh fruits and vegetables that we can buy all year-round. If he developed a toothache or fell ill, the best his dentists and doctors could do for him would make us shudder.

But we’re not just better off than a French king who lived centuries ago. We are also much better off than our own great-grandparents. For a start, we can expect to live about thirty years longer. A century ago, one child in ten died in infancy. Now, in most rich nations, that figure is less than one in two hundred.<sup>8</sup> Another telling indicator of how wealthy we are today is the modest number of hours we must work in order to meet our basic dietary needs. Today Americans spend, on average, only 6 percent of their income on buying food. If they work a forty-hour week, it takes them barely two hours to earn enough to feed themselves for the week. That leaves far more to spend on consumer goods, entertainment, and vacations.

And then we have the superrich, people who spend their money on palatial homes, ridiculously large and luxurious boats, and private planes. Before the 2008 stock market crash trimmed the numbers, there were more than 1,100 billionaires

in the world, with a combined net worth of \$4.4 trillion.<sup>9</sup> To cater to such people, Lufthansa Technik unveiled its plans for a private configuration of Boeing's new 787 Dreamliner. In commercial service, this plane will seat up to 330 passengers. The private version will carry 35, at a price of \$150 million. Cost aside, there's nothing like owning a really big airplane carrying a small number of people to maximize your personal contribution to global warming. Apparently, there are already several billionaires who fly around in private commercial-sized airliners, from 747s down. Larry Page and Sergey Brin, the Google cofounders, reportedly bought a Boeing 767 and spent millions fitting it out for their private use.<sup>10</sup> But for conspicuous waste of money and resources it is hard to beat Anousheh Ansari, an Iranian-American telecommunications entrepreneur who paid a reported \$20 million for eleven days in space. Comedian Lewis Black said on Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* that Ansari did it because it was "the only way she could achieve her life's goal of flying over every single starving person on earth and yelling 'Hey, look what I'm spending my money on!'"

While I was working on this book, a special advertising supplement fell out of my Sunday edition of *The New York Times*: a sixty-eight-page glossy magazine filled with advertising for watches by Rolex, Patek Philippe, Breitling, and other luxury brands. The ads didn't carry price tags, but a puff piece about the revival of the mechanical watch gave guidance about the lower end of the range. After admitting that inexpensive quartz watches are extremely accurate and functional, the article opined that there is "something engaging about a mechanical movement." Right, but how much will it cost you to have this engaging something on your wrist? "You might think that getting into mechanical watches is an expensive proposition, but there are plenty of choices in the \$500–\$5000 range." Admittedly, "these opening-price-point models are pretty simple:

basic movement, basic time display, simple decoration and so on.” From which we can gather that most of the watches advertised are priced upward of \$5,000, or more than one hundred times what anyone needs to pay for a reliable, accurate quartz watch. That there is a market for such products—and one worth advertising at such expense to the wide readership of *The New York Times*—is another indication of the affluence of our society.<sup>11</sup>

If you’re shaking your head at the excesses of the superrich, though, don’t shake too hard. Think again about some of the ways Americans with average incomes spend their money. In most places in the United States, you can get your recommended eight glasses of water a day out of the tap for less than a penny, while a bottle of water will set you back \$1.50 or more.<sup>12</sup> And in spite of the environmental concerns raised by the waste of energy that goes into producing and transporting it, Americans are still buying bottled water, to the tune of more than 31 billion liters in 2006.<sup>13</sup> Think, too, of the way many of us get our caffeine fix: You can make coffee at home for pennies rather than spending three dollars or more on a latte. Or have you ever casually said yes to a waiter’s prompt to order a second soda or glass of wine that you didn’t even finish? When Dr. Timothy Jones, an archaeologist, led a U.S. government-funded study of food waste, he found that 14 percent of household garbage is perfectly good food that was in its original packaging and not out of date. More than half of this food was dry-packaged or canned goods that keep for a long time. According to Jones, \$100 billion of food is wasted in the United States every year.<sup>14</sup> Fashion designer Deborah Lindquist claims that the average woman owns more than \$600 worth of clothing that she has not worn in the last year.<sup>15</sup> Whatever the actual figure may be, it is fair to say that almost all of us, men and women alike, buy things we don’t need, some of which we never even use.

Most of us are absolutely certain that we wouldn't hesitate to save a drowning child, and that we would do it at considerable cost to ourselves. Yet while thousands of children die each day, we spend money on things we take for granted and would hardly notice if they were not there. Is that wrong? If so, how far does our obligation to the poor go?

## 2. Is It Wrong Not to Help?

Bob is close to retirement. He has invested most of his savings in a very rare and valuable old car, a Bugatti, which he has not been able to insure. The Bugatti is his pride and joy. Not only does Bob get pleasure from driving and caring for his car, he also knows that its rising market value means that he will be able to sell it and live comfortably after retirement. One day when Bob is out for a drive, he parks the Bugatti near the end of a railway siding and goes for a walk up the track. As he does so, he sees that a runaway train, with no one aboard, is rolling down the railway track. Looking farther down the track, he sees the small figure of a child who appears to be absorbed in playing on the tracks. Oblivious to the runaway train, the child is in great danger. Bob can't stop the train, and the child is too far away to hear his warning shout, but Bob can throw a switch that will divert the train down the siding where his Bugatti is parked. If he does so, nobody will be killed, but the train will crash through the decaying barrier at the end of the siding and destroy his Bugatti. Thinking of his joy in owning

the car and the financial security it represents, Bob decides not to throw the switch.

*The car or the child?*

Philosopher Peter Unger developed this variation on the story of the drowning child to challenge us to think further about how much we believe we should sacrifice in order to save the life of a child. Unger's story adds a factor often crucial to our thinking about real-world poverty: uncertainty about the outcome of our sacrifice. Bob cannot be certain that the child will die if he does nothing and saves his car. Perhaps at the last moment the child will hear the train and leap to safety. In the same way, most of us can summon doubts about whether the money we give to a charity is really helping the people it's intended to help.

In my experience, people almost always respond that Bob acted badly when he did not throw the switch and destroy his most cherished and valuable possession, thereby sacrificing his hope of a financially secure retirement. We can't take a serious risk with a child's life, they say, merely to save a car, no matter how rare and valuable the car may be. By implication, we should also believe that with the simple act of saving money for retirement, we are acting as badly as Bob. For in saving money for retirement, we are effectively refusing to use that money to help save lives. This is a difficult implication to confront. How can it be wrong to save for a comfortable retirement? There is, at the very least, something puzzling here.

Another example devised by Unger tests the level of sacrifice we think people should make to alleviate suffering in cases when a life is not at stake:

You are driving your vintage sedan down a country lane when you are stopped by a hiker who has seriously injured

his leg. He asks you to take him to the nearest hospital. If you refuse, there is a good chance that he will lose his leg. On the other hand, if you agree to take him to hospital, he is likely to bleed onto the seats, which you have recently, and expensively, restored in soft white leather.

Again, most people respond that you should drive the hiker to the hospital. This suggests that when prompted to think in concrete terms, about real individuals, most of us consider it obligatory to lessen the serious suffering of innocent others, even at some cost (even a high cost) to ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

### *The Basic Argument*

The above examples reveal our intuitive belief that we ought to help others in need, at least when we can see them and when we are the only person in a position to save them. But our moral intuitions are not always reliable, as we can see from variations in what people in different times and places find intuitively acceptable or objectionable. The case for helping those in extreme poverty will be stronger if it does not rest solely on our intuitions. Here is a logical argument from plausible premises to the same conclusion.

First premise: Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.

Second premise: If it is in your power to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything nearly as important, it is wrong not to do so.

Third premise: By donating to aid agencies, you can prevent suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care, without sacrificing anything nearly as important.

Conclusion: Therefore, if you do not donate to aid agencies, you are doing something wrong.

The drowning-child story is an application of this argument for aid, since ruining your shoes and being late for work aren't nearly as important as the life of a child. Similarly, reupholstering a car is not nearly as big a deal as losing a leg. Even in the case of Bob and the Bugatti, it would be a big stretch to suggest that the loss of the Bugatti would come close to rivaling the significance of the death of an innocent person.

Ask yourself if you can deny the premises of the argument. How could suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care not be really, really bad? Think of that small boy in Ghana who died of measles. How you would feel if you were his mother or father, watching helplessly as your son suffers and grows weaker? You know that children often die from this condition. You also know that it would be curable, if only you could afford to take your child to a hospital. In those circumstances you would give up almost anything for some way of ensuring your child's survival.

Putting yourself in the place of others, like the parents of that boy, or the child himself, is what thinking ethically is all about. It is encapsulated in the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Though the Golden Rule is best known to most westerners from the words of Jesus as reported by Matthew and Luke, it is remarkably universal, being found in Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, and Jainism, and in Judaism, where it is found in Leviticus, and later emphasized by the sage Hillel.<sup>2</sup> The Golden Rule requires us to accept that the desires of others ought to count as if they were our own. If the desires of the parents of the dying child were our own, we would have no doubt that their suffering and the death of their child are about as bad as anything can be. So if we think ethically, then those desires must count as if they



were our own, and we cannot deny that the suffering and death are bad.

The second premise is also very difficult to reject, because it leaves us some wiggle room when it comes to situations in which, to prevent something bad, we would have to risk something *nearly* as important as the bad thing we are preventing. Consider, for example, a situation in which you can only prevent the deaths of other children by neglecting your own children. This standard does not require you to prevent the deaths of the other children.

“Nearly as important” is a vague term. That’s deliberate, because I’m confident that you can do without plenty of things that are clearly and inarguably not as valuable as saving a child’s life. I don’t know what *you* might think is as important, or nearly as important, as saving a life. By leaving it up to you to decide what those things are, I can avoid the need to find out. I’ll trust you to be honest with yourself about it.

Analogies and stories can be pushed too far. Rescuing a child drowning in front of you, and throwing a switch on a railroad track to save the life of a child you can see in the distance, where you are the only one who can save the child, are both different from giving aid to people who are far away. The argument I have just presented complements the drowning-child case, because instead of pulling at your heartstrings by focusing on a single child in need, it appeals to your reason and seeks your assent to an abstract but compelling moral principle. That means that to reject it, you need to find a flaw in the reasoning.

You might now be thinking to yourself that the basic argument—that we should donate to aid agencies when by doing so we can prevent suffering and death without giving up anything nearly as important— isn’t all that controversial. Yet if we were to take it seriously, our lives would be changed dramatically. For while the cost of saving one child’s life by a donation

to an aid organization may not be great, after you have donated that sum, there remain more children in need of saving, each one of whom can be saved at a relatively small additional cost. Suppose you have just sent \$200 to an agency that can, for that amount, save the life of a child in a developing country who would otherwise have died. You've done something really good, and all it has cost you is the price of some new clothes you didn't really need anyway. Congratulations! But don't celebrate your good deed by opening a bottle of champagne, or even going to a movie. The cost of that bottle or movie, added to what you could save by cutting down on a few other extravagances, would save the life of another child. After you forgo those items, and give another \$200, though, is everything else you are spending on as important, or nearly as important, as the life of a child? Not likely! So you must keep cutting back on unnecessary spending, and donating what you save, until you have reduced yourself to the point where if you give any more, you will be sacrificing something nearly as important as a child's life—like giving so much that you can no longer afford to give your children an adequate education.

We tend to assume that if people do not harm others, keep their promises, do not lie or cheat, support their children and their elderly parents, and perhaps contribute a little to needier members of their local community, they've done well. If we have money left over after meeting our needs and those of our dependents, we may spend it as we please. Giving to strangers, especially those beyond one's community, may be good, but we don't think of it as something we *have* to do. But if the basic argument presented above is right, then what many of us consider acceptable behavior must be viewed in a new, more ominous light. When we spend our surplus on concerts or fashionable shoes, on fine dining and good wines, or on holidays in faraway lands, we are doing something wrong.

Suddenly the three premises laid out above are much harder

to swallow. You may now be questioning whether a moral argument that has such radically demanding implications can possibly be sound. And so it's worth stepping back a moment to look at how this argument fits into some of our most respected ethical traditions.

### *Traditional Views on Helping the Poor*

In the Christian tradition, helping the poor is a requirement for salvation. Jesus told the rich man: "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor." To make sure his message wasn't missed, he went on to say that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.<sup>3</sup> He praised the Good Samaritan who went out of his way to help a stranger.<sup>4</sup> He urged those who give feasts to invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind.<sup>5</sup> When he spoke of the last judgment, he said that God will save those who have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, and clothed the naked. It is how we act toward "the least of these brothers of mine" that will determine, Jesus says, whether we inherit the kingdom of God or go into the eternal fire.<sup>6</sup> He places far more emphasis on charity for the poor than on anything else.

Not surprisingly, early and medieval Christians took these teachings very seriously. Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, proposed that those with a surplus should share with the needy: "Your surplus at the present time should supply their needs, so that their surplus may also supply your needs, that there may be equality."<sup>7</sup> The members of the early Christian community in Jerusalem, according to the account given in the Acts of the Apostles, sold all their possessions and divided them according to need.<sup>8</sup> The Franciscans, the order of monks founded by Francis of Assisi, took a vow of poverty and

renounced all private property. Thomas Aquinas, the great medieval scholar whose ideas became the semi-official philosophy of the Roman Catholic church, wrote that whatever we have in “superabundance”—that is, above and beyond what will reasonably satisfy our own needs and those of our family, for the present and the foreseeable future—“is owed, of natural right, to the poor for their sustenance.” In support of this view, he quoted Ambrose, one of the four original “Great Doctors” or teachers of the Church. He also cited the *Decretum Gratiani*, a twelfth-century compilation of canon law that contains the powerful statement, “The bread which you withhold belongs to the hungry: the clothing you shut away, to the naked: and the money you bury in the earth is the redemption and freedom of the penniless.”

Note that “owed” and “belongs.” For these Christians, sharing our surplus wealth with the poor is not a matter of charity, but of our duty and their rights. Aquinas even went so far as to say: “It is not theft, properly speaking, to take secretly and use another’s property in a case of extreme need: because that which he takes for the support of his life becomes his own property by reason of that need.”<sup>9</sup> This isn’t just a Roman Catholic view. John Locke, the favorite philosopher of America’s founding fathers, wrote that “charity gives every man a title to so much out of another’s plenty, as will keep him from extreme want, where he has no means to subsist otherwise.”<sup>10</sup>

Today, some Christians are seeking a renewed focus on the message of the gospels. Jim Wallis, founder and editor of the Christian magazine *Sojourners*, likes to point out that the Bible contains more than three thousand references to alleviating poverty—enough reason, he thinks, for making this a central moral issue for Christians.<sup>11</sup> Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Life* and pastor of the Saddleback Church, visited South Africa in 2003 and came across a tiny church operating from a dilapidated tent and sheltering twenty-five chil-

dren orphaned by AIDS. This was, Warren says, “like a knife in the heart: I realized they were doing more for the poor than my entire megachurch.” Since then, with his encouragement, more than 7,500 Saddleback Church members have paid their own way to developing countries to do volunteer work fighting poverty and disease. Once they have seen the situation for themselves, many want to keep helping. Warren himself now says, “I couldn’t care less about politics, the culture wars. My only interest is to get people to care about Darfurs and Rwandas.”<sup>12</sup>

Helping the poor is also strongly emphasized in Judaism, the source of many of those three thousand biblical references to helping the poor. The Hebrew word for “charity,” *tzedakah*, simply means “justice” and, as this suggests, for Jews, giving to the poor is no optional extra but an essential part of living a just life. In the Talmud (a record of discussions of Jewish law and ethics by ancient rabbis) it is said that charity is equal in importance to all the other commandments combined, and that Jews should give at least 10 percent of their income as *tzedakah*.<sup>13</sup>

Islam, too, requires its adherents to help those in need. Each year, Muslims above a minimum level of wealth must give *zakat* in proportion to their assets (not income). For gold and silver—which today are understood to include cash and other liquid assets—the requirement is to give 2.5 percent every year. In addition, one may give *sadaqa*, which may include both money and labor—for example, digging a well so that travelers will have water, or helping build a mosque. Unlike *zakat*, *sadaqa* is optional.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are related traditions with their roots in the same part of the world. The Chinese tradition is quite distinct and, it is sometimes said, more focused on how one acts to those with whom one is in some relationship, especially familial; yet here, too, it is possible to find a very strong statement of our obligations to the poor. Mencius, who lived

about three hundred years before the Christian era, is regarded as the most authoritative interpreter of the Confucian tradition, and in terms of his influence on Chinese thought is second only to Confucius himself. One of the works that describes his teachings recounts a visit he paid to the court of King Hui of Liang. On arriving, he met the king and said to him:

There are people dying from famine on the roads, and you do not issue the stores of your granaries for them. When people die, you say, "It is not owing to me; it is owing to the year." In what does this differ from stabbing a man and killing him, and then saying "It was not I, it was the weapon?"<sup>14</sup>

There is nothing new about the idea that we have a strong moral obligation to help those in need. In one-on-one situations where rescue is easy, our intuitions tell us that it would be wrong not to do it. We all see or read appeals to help those living in extreme poverty in the world's poorest countries. And yet most of us reject the call to "do unto others." I'll turn now to some of the reasons we give for our failure to act.