

One test therefore of whether the argument that I have constructed has or has not empirical application and practical significance would be to discover whether it is or is not genuinely illuminating to write the political and social history of modern America as in key part the living out of a central conceptual confusion, a confusion perhaps required for the survival of a large-scale modern polity that has to exhibit itself as liberal in many institutional settings, but that also has to be able to engage the patriotic regard of enough of its citizens, if it is to continue functioning effectively. To determine whether that is or is not true would be to risk discovering that we inhabit a kind of polity whose moral order requires systematic incoherence in the form of public allegiance to mutually inconsistent sets of principles. But that is a task that—happily—lies beyond the scope of this lecture.

## 8. ONORA O'NEILL

O'Neill considers what three different kinds of moral theory say ought to be done about hunger and famine. She criticizes utilitarianism for requiring calculations that we are unable to make and for failing to prioritize human needs. Against theories that take human rights as basic, O'Neill points out that they are divided on the issue of whether some "welfare" rights—such as a right to subsistence—are human rights. Those who deny that such rights are human rights neglect human needs, she argues, while those who endorse such rights have yet to show convincingly who bears the correlative obligations. Many human rights theorists also fall short by denying that there are obligations of humanity or beneficence. O'Neill herself advocates a third kind of theorizing that takes human obligations as basic and, in particular, the Kantian obligation never to act in ways in which others cannot in principle also act. Such a theory, she argues, provides a better normative response to hunger and famine than utilitarianism and human rights approaches.

### **Rights, Obligations and World Hunger**

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#### **HUNGER AND FAMINE**

Some of the facts of world hunger and poverty are now widely known. Among them are the following six:

1. World population is now over 5 billion and rising rapidly. It will exceed 6 billion by end of this century.

2. In many Third World countries, investment and growth have so far concentrated in an urbanized modern sector, whose benefits reach a minority.
3. In many poor countries, the number of destitute and landless increases even when there is economic growth.
4. In many African countries, harvests have been falling for two decades and dependence on imported grain is growing.
5. The rich countries of the North (for these purposes "the North" means the countries of North America, the EEC, and Australasia!) grow vast surpluses of grain. The grain that goes to poor countries is mostly sold.
6. The rural poor of the Third World are sometimes harmed by grain imports, which are distributed in towns, so depriving peasants of customers for their crops. These peasants then migrate to shantytowns.

And then there is Ethiopia. We can understand the famine in Ethiopia better in the wider context of world hunger. Famines are not unexpected natural catastrophes, but simply the harshest extreme of hunger. We know well enough where in the world poverty and hunger are constantly bad enough for minor difficulties to escalate into famine. Ethiopia had its last famine only ten years ago. We know which other regions in Africa, Asia, and Latin America are now vulnerable to famines. Famine is the tip of the iceberg of hunger. It is the bit that is publicized and to which we react; but the greater part of the suffering is less lurid and better hidden.

Most hungry people are not migrating listlessly or waiting for the arrival of relief supplies. They are leading their normal lives with their normal economic, social, and familial situations, earning and growing what they normally earn or grow, yet are always poor and often hungry. These normal conditions are less spectacular than famine, but affect far more people.

We are tempted to set famine aside from other, endemic hunger and poverty. We blame natural catastrophes such as floods, drought,

blight, or cold for destroying crops and producing famines. But harsh circumstances cause famines only when social and economic structures are too fragile to absorb such natural shocks. Californians know that desert climates need not lead to famines. Minnesotans know that a ferocious winter need not be reflected in countless annual deaths from cold. Yet both regions would have catastrophic annual mortality if they lacked appropriate social and economic structures. Many natural catastrophes produce human catastrophes only when social structures are inadequate.

## FOCUS ON ACTION

We could list the facts of world hunger, poverty, and famine endlessly. But facts alone do not tell us what to do. What surely matters is action. But here we meet a problem. Which action we advocate depends partly on our perception of the facts, and this perception itself depends partly on the particular ethical outlook we adopt. Both our perception of problems and our prescriptions for action reflect our ethical theory. Ethical theories are not elegant trimmings that decorate our reasoning about practical problems. They determine our entire focus. They lead us to see certain facts and principles as salient and others as insubstantial. They focus our action—or our inertia.

I shall here consider three theories of what ought to be done about hunger and famine. Two are widely known and discussed in present debates in the English-speaking world, while the third, though in many ways older and more familiar, now receives rather less public attention. I shall offer certain criticisms of the two prevailing approaches and recommend the third to your attention.

The first approach is one that makes human happiness and well-being the standard for assessing action. Its most common modern version is *utilitarianism*. For utilitarians, all ethical requirements are basically a matter of beneficence to others. The second approach takes respect for human rights as basic and interprets the central issues of world hunger as matters of justice, which can be secured if all rights are respected. The third approach takes fulfillment of human obligations as basic and insists that these obligations include both obligations of justice and obligations of help or beneficence to others, and above

all to others in need. Since no famine policy or development strategy would be adequate if it guided only individual action, all three of these positions will be considered as ways in which public and institutional policies as well as individual action might be guided.

## MEASURING AND MAXIMIZING HAPPINESS

The central idea of all ethical reasoning that focuses on consequences or results is that action is right if it produces good results. The specifically utilitarian version of such thinking insists that the goodness of results be assessed by their contribution to total human happiness, and specifically that the best results are those that maximize human happiness. This position is very familiar to many of us because restricted versions of it are incorporated in economic theory and in business practice, and often used in daily decision making. It leads naturally to the question: What will maximize human happiness?

This seems such a simple question, but it has been given many unclear answers. Even discussions of hunger and famine, where the means to greater happiness may seem obvious, jangle with incompatible claims. The debates of the last decade show radical disagreements between utilitarian writers on world hunger.

The Australian philosopher Peter Singer has used simple economic considerations to argue that any serious utilitarian should undertake radical redistribution of his or her possessions and income to the poor. Standard marginalist considerations suggest that we can increase happiness by transferring resources from the rich to the poor. Any unhappiness caused by the loss of a luxury—such as a car—will be more than outweighed by the happiness produced by using the same funds to buy essential food for the hungry.

But the United States writer on famine, population, and ecological problems, Garrett Hardin, argues on the contrary that help to the poorest is forbidden on utilitarian grounds because it will in the end lead to the greatest misery. Drawing on the thought of the early-nineteenth-century economist and population theorist Thomas Malthus, he argues that food given to the poor will lead to population increases and ultimately to more people than can be fed and so ultimately to devastating famine and maximal misery.

It is an urgent practical question whether utilitarians can resolve these disagreements. The founder of utilitarianism, the late-eighteenth-century radical philosopher and polemicist Jeremy Bentham, thought we could do so with scientific rigor: It was only a matter of measuring and aggregating seven dimensions of human happiness. To help us he provided a pithy mnemonic verse in his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and of Legislation*:

*Intense, long, certain, speedy, fruitful, pure, —* Such marks in pleasures  
and in pains endure. Such pleasures seek if private be thy end: If  
it be public wide let them extend.<sup>1</sup>

But this is simply not enough. Despite the recurrent optimism of some economists and decision theorists about measuring happiness in limited contexts, we know we cannot generally predict or measure or aggregate happiness with any precision.

## ACCURACY, PRECISION, AND NEEDS

Yet we can, it seems, often make approximate judgments of human happiness. And perhaps that is enough. After all, we do not need great precision, but only reasonable (even if vague) accuracy. We know that hunger and destitution mean misery and that enough to eat ends that sort of misery. Do we need to know more?

If we are to be utilitarians, we do need to know more. We need not only to know what general result to aim at, but to work out what means to take. Since very small changes in actions and policies may vastly alter results, precise comparisons of many results are indispensable. Examples of some unsuspected results of intended beneficence make the point vivid. Some food aid policies have actually harmed those whom they were intended to benefit or to benefit those who were not in the first place the poorest. (This is not to say that food aid is dispensable—especially in cases of famine—but it is never enough to end misery, and it can be damaging if misdirected.) Some aid policies aimed at raising standards of life, for example by encouraging farmers to grow cash crops, have damaged the livelihood of subsistence farmers, and harmed the poorest. The benefits of aid are often diverted to those who are not in

the greatest need. The ubiquity of corruption also shows how essential it is for utilitarians to make precise and not vague judgments about how to increase human happiness. Benevolent intentions are quite easy to identify, but beneficent policies cannot be identified if we cannot predict and compare results precisely.

To do their calculations, utilitarians need not only precise measurements of happiness, but precise prediction of which policies lead to which results. They need the sort of comprehensive and predictive social science to which many researchers have aspired, but not attained. At present we cannot resolve even very basic disagreements between rival utilitarians. We cannot show whether happiness is maximized by attending to nearby desires where we can intervene personally (even if these are desires that reflect no needs), or by concentrating all our help on the neediest. Indeed, we often know too little even to predict which public policies will benefit the poor most.

If utilitarians somehow developed the precise methods of prediction and calculation that they lack, the results might not endorse help for the poor. Utilitarian thinking assigns no special importance to human need. Happiness produced by meeting the desires of those around us—even their desires for unneeded goods—may count as much as, or more than, happiness produced by ending real misery. All that matters is which desire is more intense. Since the neediest may be so weakened and apathetic that they no longer have strong desires, their need may count less and not more in a utilitarian calculus. But we know that charity that begins at home, where others' desires are evident to us, can find so much to do there that it often ends at home, too. So we can see that unless needs are given a certain priority in ethical thinking, they may be greedily neglected.

Meanwhile, utilitarian thinking unavoidably leaves vital dilemmas unclarified and unresolved. Was it beneficent, and so right, to negotiate massive development loans, although soaring interest rates have meant that much of poor countries' export earnings are now swallowed by interest payments? The present rich countries developed during a period of low and stable interest rates: They now control the ground rules of a world economy that does not provide that context of opportunity for remaining poor countries. Has it been happiness maximizing to provide development loans for poor countries in these conditions? Might happiness not be greater if poor countries had relied on lesser but

indigenous sources of investment? Or would the cost of slower growth have been a larger total of human misery that could have been avoided by higher interest rates?

These are bitter questions, and I do not know the answer in general or for particular countries. I raise them as an example of the difficulty of relying on predictions and calculations about maximal happiness in determining what ought to be done, and what it would be wrong to do.

## THE HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The difficulties of utilitarian thinking may seem to arise from its ambitious scope. Utilitarianism tries to encompass the whole of morality under a single principle, and to select acts and policies that are not only right, but best or optimal. One alternative might be to aim for rather less. This might be done by looking at principles for evaluating acts and rejecting those that are wrong, rather than at grand proposals to find just those acts and policies that provide optimal results.

The most common contemporary embodiment of this approach is that of the human rights movement, which I shall consider next. The rhetoric of human rights is all around us—perhaps never more so than at present in the English-speaking world, and particularly in the United States. The sources of the rhetoric are well known. The earlier ones are the grand eighteenth-century documents, such as Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man*, and the declaration of rights of the United States and the French revolutions. The more recent growth of concern for human rights reflects a considerable revival of such thinking in the post-World War II search for foundations for a new international order, which gave rise to various United Nations documents, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. The modern human rights movement gained impetus from the commitment of the Carter administration to a foreign policy that hoped to secure respect for human rights in other countries. While the Reagan administration and the Thatcher government have not taken a comprehensive commitment to human rights to heart, both have based their political outlook on a certain restricted picture of human rights, in which rights to property and one range of economic freedoms are given special emphasis. All these approaches take the central ethical requirement in human affairs to be respect for justice and construe justice as a matter of respect for rights.

## LIBERTY RIGHTS AND WELFARE RIGHTS

Within the tradition of discussion of human rights there is considerable disagreement about the list of rights that justice comprises. In general terms, the more right-wing proponents of the tradition assert that there are only rights to liberty, hence that we have only the corresponding obligations of noninterference with others' liberty. Other more left-wing proponents of human rights assert that there are also certain "welfare" rights, hence certain positive obligations to help and assist others. Those who think that all rights are liberty rights point to supposed rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, including the right to unregulated economic activity. On this view it is unjust to interfere with others' exercise of democratic political rights or capitalist economic rights. Those who think that there are also "welfare" rights point to supposed rights to food or basic health care or welfare payments. Since rights to unregulated economic activity are incompatible with these, they reject unrestricted economic "rights."

These disagreements cannot be settled by appeal to documents. The United Nations documents were a political compromise and resolutely confer *all* sorts of rights. Proponents of liberty rights therefore think that these documents advocate some spurious "rights," which are neither part of nor compatible with justice. However, it is worth remembering that this political compromise has in fact been accepted by nearly all governments, who therefore have a *prima facie* institutionalized treaty obligation to enact both liberty and "welfare" rights. This can be an awkward point given that many people in the West tend to fault the Eastern bloc countries for their violation of liberty rights but to overlook the systematic denial in the West of certain economic and welfare rights (such as a right to employment), which the international documents endorse.

## HUMAN RIGHTS AND HUMAN NEEDS

It matters hugely for the destitute which interpretation of rights is acceptable and is used to guide policies and decisions. If human rights are all liberty rights, then justice to the poor and hungry is achieved by *laissez-faire*—provided we do not curtail their liberties, all is just. For example, if a transnational suddenly closes its operations in a poor

country, so devastating the local economy, no injustice has been done. Or if the IMF requires severe economic retrenchment so that interest payments can be made, this is just, whatever hardships are inflicted. Or if commodity price shifts leave those who depend on a single cash crop—such as coffee, rubber, or palm oil—greatly impoverished, this is just, since no liberties will have been violated. If all human rights are liberty rights, then the needs of the poor are of no concern in working out what may be done without injustice.

But if some human rights are welfare or economic rights, justice will require that some of these needs be met. For example, if there are rights to food or to subsistence, then it is unjust not to meet these needs, and unjust not to regulate any economic activities that will prevent their being met. However, any claim that there are "welfare" rights is mere rhetoric unless the corresponding obligations are justified and allocated. And here the advocates of human rights are often evasive. It is a significant and not a trivial matter that there is no human obligations movement.

## RIGHTS, LIBERTY, AND AUTONOMY

These disputes cannot be settled unless we can show which rights there are. The eighteenth-century pioneers often claimed that certain rights were self-evident. This claim now seems brazen, and in any case cannot settle disputes between the advocates of different sets of rights. The most impressive line of argument aimed at settling these disputes takes it that human rights constitute collectively the largest possible realization of human *liberty* or of human *autonomy*. However, even if we could justify assuming that either liberty or autonomy is the most fundamental of moral concerns, these two approaches lead to quite divergent claims about what rights there are. In addition, the advocates of each approach often disagree among themselves about exactly which rights there are.

Those who think that what is fundamental is *liberty*, understood as mere, "negative" noninterference by others, allow only for liberty rights. The idea of a consistent partitioning of human liberty would collapse as soon as we try to add rights to receive help or services, for the obligations that make these "welfare" rights a reality will be

incompatible with various rights of action that basic liberty rights include. If we are obligated to provide food for all who need it, we cannot have unrestricted rights to do what we want with any food we have. At best certain societies may use their liberty rights to set up institutionalized rights to certain benefits—e.g., to education, welfare, health care—as has been done in most of the economically advanced nations. But an institutionalized right is not a natural or human right. The rights institutionalized in the developed countries have no bearing on the hunger and poverty in the Third World, where such rights have not been set up.

Those who think that it is autonomy rather than mere noninterference that is fundamental insist that there are some “welfare” rights to goods and services, such as a right to subsistence. For without adequate nutrition and shelter, human autonomy is destroyed, and liberty rights themselves would be pointless. But the advocates of subsistence rights have so far produced no convincing arguments to show who should bear obligations to feed others. Yet this is the question that matters most if “rights to subsistence” are to meet human needs.

## RIGHTS AND CHARITY

Many advocates of human rights point out that we should not worry too much if rights theory neglects human needs. We should remember that justice is not the whole of morality, which can also require voluntarily given help. The needs of the poor can be met by charity. This thought appeals to many people. But it is an unconvincing one in the context of a theory of human rights. The rights perspective itself undercuts the status of charity, regarding it not as any sort of obligation, but as something that we are free to do or to omit, a matter of supererogation rather than of obligation. Such a view of help for the needy may be comfortable for the “haves” of this world, since it suggests that they go beyond duty and do something especially good if they help others at all. But it is depressing for the “have-nots” who cannot claim help of anybody, since it is not a matter of right. They can just hope help will happen, and usually what happens will be witheringly inadequate.

## HUMAN AGENCY, RIGHTS, AND OBLIGATIONS

Justice need not be understood in the terms either of the human rights movement or of the utilitarian view of justice as just one contribution among others to human happiness. One way in which a different approach can be taken is by looking first at obligations rather than at rights. This has been a standard approach to ethical questions, both before and throughout the Christian tradition. Rights are eighteenth-century upstarts in moral discourse, as is the elevation of individual happiness to be the arbiter of moral judgment. Both these approaches see human beings in a somewhat passive way. This is plain enough in the utilitarian picture of human beings as loci of pains and pleasures. But it is less obvious that men and women are seen as passive in the theory of human rights. On the contrary, the turn to rights is sometimes defended on the grounds that it assigns a more active role to the powerless, who are to see themselves as wronged claimants rather than as the humble petitioners of more traditional, feudal pictures.

It is true that the human rights movement sees human beings *more* as agents than did feudal and utilitarian theories. But it still does not see them as fully autonomous: Claimants basically agitate for others to act. When we claim liberty rights or rights of authority, our first demand is that others act, so yielding us a space or opportunity in which we may or may not act. When we claim “welfare” rights, we need not picture ourselves as acting at all, but must see whoever bears the corresponding obligations as acting. By contrast, when we talk about obligations, we are speaking directly to those agents and agencies with the power to produce or refuse changes—the very audience that the rights perspective addresses only indirectly.

The French philosopher Simone Weil, writing during the Second World War, put the point this way in *The Need for Roots*:

The notion of obligations comes before that of rights, which is subordinate and relative to the former. A right is not effectual by itself, but only in relation to the obligation to which it corresponds, the effective exercise of a right springing not from the individual who possesses it, but from other men who consider themselves as being under a certain obligation towards him.<sup>2</sup>

We do not know what a right amounts to until we know who has what obligation to do what for whom under which circumstances. When we try to be definite about rights, we always have to talk about obligations.

A fundamental difficulty with the rhetoric of rights is that it addresses only part—and the less powerful part—of the relevant audience. This rhetoric may have results if the poor are not wholly powerless; but where they are, claiming rights provides meager pickings. When the poor are powerless, it is the powerful who must be convinced that they have certain obligations—whether or not the beneficiaries claim the performance of these obligations as their right. The first concern of an ethical theory that focuses on action should be obligations, rather than rights.

## WHAT OBLIGATIONS OF JUSTICE ARE THERE?

A theory of obligations can help deliberation about world hunger only if it is possible to show what obligations human beings have. The effort to show this without reliance on theological assumptions was made in the eighteenth century by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Recently Kant's work has often been seen as one more theory of human rights. This may be because he based his argument for human obligations on a construction analogous to that used in thinking of human rights as a partitioning of maximal human liberty or autonomy. For he asks what principles of action could consistently be shared by all agents. The root idea behind such a system of principles is that human obligations are obligations never to act in ways in which others cannot in principle also act. The fundamental principles of action must be shareable, rather than principles available only to a privileged few. Kant's method of determining the principles of obligation cannot be applied to the superficial detail of action: We evidently cannot eat the very grain another eats or have every one share the same roof. But we can try to see that the deep principles of our lives and of our institutions are shareable by all, and then work out the implications of these deep principles for particular situations.

If we use the Kantian construction, we can reach some interesting conclusions about human obligations. One obligation of justice that

emerges from the construction is that of noncoercion. For a fundamental principle of coercion in some matter cannot be shared by all, since those who are coerced are prevented from acting, and so cannot share the principle of action. Coercion, we might say with Kant, is not *universalizable*.

This argument alone does not tell us what noncoercion requires in particular situations. Clearly it rules out many things that respect for liberty rights rules out. For example, a principle of noncoercion rules out killing, maiming, assaulting, and threatening others. This range of obligations not to coerce are as important for the well fed as for the hungry. But other aspects of noncoercion are peculiarly important for the hungry. Those who aim to act on a principle of noncoercion must take account of the fact that it is always rather easy to coerce those who are weak or vulnerable by activities that would not coerce richer or more powerful people.

Avoiding coercion is not just a matter of avoiding a short list of interferences in others' action, as rights approaches would have us imagine. Avoiding coercion means making sure that in our dealings with others we leave them room either to accept or to refuse the offers and suggestions made. This shows why an emphasis on obligations not to coerce is particularly telling in evaluating our dealings with the poor: They are so easily coerced. We can make them "offers they cannot refuse" with the greatest of ease. What might be genuine offers among equals, which others can accept or reject, can be threatening and unrefusable for the needy and vulnerable. They can be harmed in ways that threaten life by standard commercial or legal procedures, such as business deals that locate dangerous industrial processes in urban areas, or exact stiff political concessions for investment, or for what passes as aid, or that set harsh commercial conditions on "aid," such as mandating unneeded imports from a "donor" nation.

Arrangements of these sorts can coerce even when they use the outward forms of commercial bargaining and legality. These forms of bargaining are designed for use between agents of roughly equal power. They may not be enough to protect the powerless. Hence both individuals and agencies such as corporations and national governments (both of the North and of the South) and aid agencies must meet exacting standards if they are not to coerce the vulnerable in ordinary legal, diplomatic, and commercial

dealings. Economic or material justice cannot be achieved without avoiding institutionalized as well as individual forms of coercion.

A second fundamental obligation of justice is that of avoiding deception. A principle of deception, too, is not universalizable, because victims of deception, like victims of coercion, are in principle precluded from sharing the perpetrator's principle of action, which is kept hidden from them. However, since the obligation of nondeception is relevant to all public and political life, and not solely for dealings that affect the poor, the hungry, and the vulnerable (although they are more easily deceived), I shall not explore its implications here.

### **OBLIGATIONS TO HELP: EMERGENCY RELIEF, DEVELOPMENT, AND RESPECT**

In a rights framework, the whole of our moral obligations are brought under the heading of justice. But an obligations approach of the Kantian type also justifies obligations that are not obligations of justice and whose performance cannot be claimed as rights. Some types of action cannot be done for all others, so they cannot be a universal obligation or have corresponding rights. Yet they also are not contingent on any special relationship, so they cannot be a matter of special, institutionalized obligation. Yet they can be a matter of obligation. A theory of obligation, unlike a theory of rights, can allow for "imperfect" obligations, which are not allocated to specified recipients and so cannot be claimed.

This provides a further way in which an appreciation of need can enter into a theory of human obligations. We know that others in need are vulnerable and not self-sufficient. It follows that, even if they are not coerced, they may be unable to act, and so unable to become or remain autonomous agents who could act on principles that can be universally shared. Hence, if our fundamental commitment is to treat others as agents who could share the same principles that we act on, then we must be committed equally to strategies and policies that enable them to become and to remain agents. If we do anything less, we do not view others as doers like ourselves. However, nobody and no agent can do everything to sustain the autonomy of all others. Hence obligations to help are not and cannot be obligations to meet all needs; but they can be obligations not to base our lives on principles that are indifferent to

or neglectful of others' need and what it actually takes to sustain their agency. In particular situations such "imperfect" obligations may require specific and arduous action. The fact that we cannot help everyone only shows that we have no obligation to help everyone, and not that we have no obligation to help anyone.

If we are not indifferent or neglectful of the requirements for sustaining others' autonomy we will, I suggest, find ourselves committed not only to justice but to various further principles in our action toward the poor and vulnerable. First we will be committed to material help that sustains agency, by helping people over the threshold of poverty below which possibilities for autonomous action are absent or meager. Since sustained and systematic help is needed if vulnerability and dependence are not to recur endlessly, this implies a commitment to development policies as well as to emergency food aid.

Unreliable aid does not secure autonomy. But nor, of course, can withholding food aid in emergencies secure autonomy. Since human needs are recurrent, food aid is not enough. Food is eaten and is gone; help can secure others' agency only if it constructs social and economic institutions that can meet human needs on a sustained basis. This means that help to the poorest and most vulnerable must seek sustainable production to make sure that when a given cycle of consumption is past, more is in the pipeline. Development of the relevant sort is evidently not only an economic matter; it also includes the development of human skills by appropriate education and institutional changes that help poor and vulnerable people to gain some control over their lives.

Since the basis of these obligations to help is the claim that principles of action must be shareable by all, the pursuit of development must not itself reduce or damage others' agency. It must not fail to respect those who are helped. Their desires and views must be sought, and their participation respected. Agency is not fostered if the poor experience "donor" agencies as new oppressors. Others' autonomy is not sustained if they are left feeling that they have been the victims of good works.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND AFTERTHOUGHTS**

The theory of obligations just sketched is surprisingly familiar to most of us. It is not distant from pictures of human obligation that we find

in the Christian tradition, and in the idiom of much of our social life. And it chimes closely with other traditions, too. Many of the voluntary aid agencies are fond of quoting a Chinese proverb that runs: Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach him to fish and you feed him for life. President Reagan too has quoted this saying.

Although the position is traditional and familiar, the favored ethical theories of today do not endorse it. Utilitarian perspectives endorse the pursuit of happiness without specific concern to meet needs; human rights perspectives do not vindicate obligations to help those in need. It therefore seems appropriate to end with some polemical questions rather than a feeling of reassurance. How and why have we allowed uncertain images of maximal happiness and self-centered visions of claiming human rights to distort our understanding of central ethical notions such as justice, beneficence, and respect for human agents? Why have so many people been sure that our obligations to others are a matter of not interfering in their concern—of doing . . . nothing?

If human obligations are based on the requirements for respecting and securing one another's agency, then we may find another of Simone Weil's remarks to the point:

The obligation is only performed if the respect is effectively expressed in a real, not a fictitious, way; and this can only be done through the medium of Man's earthly needs. . . . On this point, the human conscience has never varied. Thousands of years ago, the Egyptians believed that no soul could justify itself after death unless it could say, "I have never let anyone suffer from hunger." All Christians know they are liable to hear Christ say to them one day, "I was an hungered, and ye gave me no meat." Every one looks on progress as being, in the first place, a transition to a state of human society in which people will not suffer from hunger.<sup>3</sup>

To make that transition is indeed no longer a matter of feeding the beggar at the gate. Modern opportunities are broader and demand political as well as—perhaps more than—merely individual action. Of course, no individual can do everything. But this will daunt only those who are riveted by an exclusively individual conception of human endeavor and success. If we remember that many human activities and successes are not individual, we need not be daunted. We can then act

in the knowledge that no individual and no institution is prevented from making those decisions within its power in ways that help fulfill rather than spurn obligations to the hungry.

## NOTES

1. Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and of Legislation* (New York: Hafner Publishing Co., 1948), p. 29.
2. Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (New York: Harper & Row, 1952), p. 3.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 6.