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 us to make calculations that we are unable to make and for failing to prioritize human needs in a way that respects the moral significance of human rights. Against theories that take human rights as a derived concept—such as a legal substitute—she argues that human rights are fundamental to our moral lives and that they cannot be reduced to the issue of whether some “wrong”0s are done to those who lack them. O'Neill argues that our moral theory should include a commitment to the realization of human needs. A central theme in her work is the idea that human rights are moral rights, and that they are fundamental to our moral lives. O'Neill believes that we need to be more concerned with the realization of human rights, and that we should not be content with simply addressing the symptoms of hunger and poverty. Instead, we should be concerned with the underlying causes of these problems, and we should be working to address the structural inequalities that contribute to them.

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 6 billion and rising rapidly. It will exceed 8 billion by end of this century.

2. Hunger and malnutrition are the following six:

3. The world's population is growing rapidly, and the demand for food is increasing at an even faster rate. This has led to a widening gap between the rich and the poor, as well as within countries.

4. The distribution of wealth and resources is highly unequal, with a small number of people controlling a large portion of the world's resources.

5. Climate change is exacerbating the problem of hunger and poverty, as it is disrupting traditional agricultural practices and creating new challenges for farmers.

6. There is a lack of investment in public health and education, which further perpetuates the cycle of poverty and hunger.

Rights, Obligations and World Hunger

Rights, obligations, and world hunger are closely linked. The realization of human rights requires the fulfillment of basic needs, such as food, water, and shelter. This is particularly important in contexts of poverty and hunger, where the lack of access to these basic resources can have devastating consequences for individuals and societies. O'Neill argues that the realization of human rights requires a commitment to justice and equality, and that this commitment is essential for the creation of a more just and sustainable world.

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In many Third World countries, investment and growth have so far concentrated in an urbanized modern sector, whose benefits reach a minority.

In many poor counties, the number of destitute and landless increases even when there is economic growth.

In many African countries, harvests have been falling for two decades and dependence on imported grain is growing.

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.

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.

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 spectacular and hidden. Where there is hunger, people are not simply waiting for relief supplies. They are leading their normal lives with their normal economic, social, and familial situations, yet are always poor and often hungry.

There are two prevailing approaches to solving the problem of world hunger and famine. Two are widely known and discussed, but they are not adequate in their determinations about what should be done about world hunger and famine.

The first approach is one that makes human happiness and welfare the end and purpose of our concern. They determine one outcome for these problems. They regard us as creating these outcomes and are therefore the means to enforce our practical problems and are not concerned with other aspects of these problems.

The second approach focuses on action, not on perception. It seeks outward, rather than inward, solutions to these problems. It seeks action that may change social and economic structures. It seeks solutions that are adequate in the determinations they make about what should be done about world hunger and famine.

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 principles and policies should we choose? What is the best course of action? What is the most logical way to proceed?

I shall here consider three theories of what ought to be done about hunger and famine. Two are widely known and discussed and have obtained considerable 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 formulation is the " utilitarian" version, in which the goals are defined as the maximization of human happiness and well-being. The means are defined as the policies and actions that lead to these ends.

The second approach is one that seeks to change social and economic structures. Its most common formulation is the "socialist" or "Marxist" version. It seeks to change the economic system, the distribution of income and wealth, and the relationships between people. The means are defined as the policies and actions that lead to these ends.

The third approach is one that seeks to change the attitudes and behaviors of individuals and groups. Its most common formulation is the "humanitarian" or "charitable" version. It seeks to change the beliefs and values of people, and to persuade them to act in ways that will reduce hunger and famine.
Global Ethics: Seminal Essays

The benefits of the global economy are often distributed in ways that are not in the best interests of poor people. The growth of the global economy has led to increasing inequality, and the benefits of economic growth have not been shared equally. Some of the poorest countries in the world have experienced significant economic growth in recent years, while others have continued to struggle. The global economy has also led to increased environmental degradation, as countries that are not contributing to the pollution have to bear the brunt of the costs. The global economy has also led to increased political instability, as countries that are not able to benefit from economic growth have become increasingly unstable. The global economy has also led to increased cultural homogenization, as countries that are not able to protect their cultures have become increasingly homogenized. The global economy has also led to increased social inequality, as countries that are not able to provide basic social services have become increasingly unequal.
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 greatly neglected.

Meanwhile, utilitarian thinking unavoidably leaves vital dilemmas unclarified and unresolved. Was it beneficent, or 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. 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 more indigenous sources of investment? If the cost of short-term growth

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 policies, 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 the human rights movement. The human rights movement began in the late eighteenth century with the publication of 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 era. The human rights movement has been shaped by the evolution of international law and the international institutions that have emerged in the post-World War II era. The human rights movement has been shaped by the evolution of international law and the international institutions that have emerged in the post-World War II era. The human rights movement has been shaped by the evolution of international law and the international institutions that have emerged in the post-World War II era.
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.

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, it is not a right to employment or income that is violated. Or if the U.S. requires severe economic retrenchment so that interest payments can be made, this is just. 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 are involved, the corresponding obligations are just as well. However, any claim that there are welfare rights, and if these welfare rights constitute collectively the highest possible realization of human liberty or human autonomy, however far the realization of human rights constitution collectively the highest possible realization of human liberty or human autonomy, however far it may fall short of the ideal, then the corresponding obligations to receive help and welfare rights can be seen as their own reason for existence, and to look to their satisfaction is not merely to meet these needs, but to meet the highest needs of the human person. If these needs be met, if these needs are recognized, then all the more reason to seek these ends, and to seek the highest ends for example: if there are rights to receive “welfare,” then it is even more important to secure welfare payments, to provide economic security, to secure the highest ends for all.

The same principle can apply to documents. The same principle can apply to documents. The same principle can apply to documents. The same principle can apply to documents.
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. 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 comforting for the “haves” of this world, who can use charity to offset the lack of rights that they enjoy. But it is depressing for the “have-nots” who cannot claim help of anybody, since it is not a matter of right. They can use charity to protect their own interests, but they cannot do anything about the lack of rights that they have.

Justice need not be understood in the terms of the human rights approach. 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 effective 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. The notion of obligations must be understood in the terms of the human rights approach, in which we have to determine what obligations are owed by society as a whole, rather than what rights are enjoyed by individuals. The human rights approach is too superficial to meet human needs.
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 can not 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 justice are not offended. For a deeper insight, we can try to make our own deep principles of our lives and of our institutions visible to others. We can see that the fundamental principles of action are not only the deep principles of justice that form the most relevant test of what constitutes action. We can also see that the deep principles of justice are the most relevant test of what constitutes obligations. And we can work out the implications of these deep obligations for particular situations.

We do not know what a right amounts to until we know who has that obligation of justice that corresponds to a right. When we try to be definite about rights, we always have to talk about obligations.
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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, 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 people we consider who could share the same principles that we act on 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 to help in such a way that people can construct social and economic institutions that can meet human needs on a sustained basis. This means that help can secure others' agency only if it constructively affects economic and social conditions so that people are free from hunger, food is secure and economic conditions do not promote dependency. For this reason, help is needed if we are to construct the kind of society in which people can know that they are free to act as agents. Even if we do not help people to become agents, our help must enable them to become agents. 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 people we consider who could share the same principles that we act on to become and to remain agents.

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. 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 to help in such a way that people can construct 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 passed, the people whose resources are depleted can once again have enough to eat and to secure other needs. If we do not help people to become agents, our help must enable them to become agents. 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 people we consider who could share the same principles that we act on to become and to remain agents.

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