

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 at some cost (even a high cost) to ourselves.¹

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 effective charities, 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 effective charities, you are doing something wrong.

The drowning-child story is an application of this argument for donating, 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 car 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 would you 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 both older, and more universal, than that. It is prominent in the teachings of Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, and Jainism, and in Judaism, where it is found in Leviticus, and later emphasized by the sage Hillel.² 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. Then the second premise 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 donating to help 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. This 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 people in extreme poverty 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 contribution to an effective non-profit organization may not be great, after you have given 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 the Against Malaria Foundation, enabling the purchase of 100 long-lasting insecticidal nets that will protect about 180 people from malaria-carrying mosquitoes.³ 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 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 preventing of malaria, which in low-income countries in tropical regions is a major cause of children dying, and even when not fatal, causes high fever and long-term, debilitating illness? 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 preventing malaria—like giving so much that you can no longer afford an adequate education for your own children.

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

According to the Gospels, 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.⁴ He praised the Good Samaritan who went out of his way to help a stranger.⁵ He urged those who give feasts to invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind.⁶ 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 said, whether we inherit the kingdom of God or go into the eternal fire.⁷ He placed 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.”⁸ 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.⁹ 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 12th-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 the words “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.”¹⁰ 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.”¹¹

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 3,000 references to alleviating poverty—enough reason, he thinks, for making this a central moral issue for Christians.¹² 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 25 children 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.” Warren himself said: “I couldn’t care less about politics, the culture wars. My only interest is to get people to care about Darfurs and Rwandas.”¹³

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% of their income as *tzedakah*.¹⁴

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 just their income). For gold and silver—a category that today is understood to include cash and other liquid assets—the requirement is to give 2.5% every year. In addition, one may give *sadaqa*, which can 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 family, than it is concerned with acts of charity towards strangers in need. Yet here, too, it is possible to find very strong statements of our obligations to the poor. Mencius, who lived about 300 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?"¹⁵

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 so. Yet we all see or read appeals to help those living in extreme poverty in the world's poorest countries and nevertheless most of us fail to "do unto others." I'll turn now to some of the reasons we give for our failure to act.

3. Common Objections to Giving

You may think of yourself as a charitable person. Most Americans do, and the \$427 billion they donated to charities in 2018, 68% of which came directly from individuals, lends support to that belief. In the United States, charitable giving is around 2% of the U.S. gross national income.¹ That's significantly more than in any other country, but we cannot take this as an indication that Americans as a whole are especially generous, because the figure is boosted by very substantial giving from a small number of extremely wealthy people. If we look at the percentage of the population that gives to charity, the United States ranks only 12th, with 61% of the population giving, well below the top-ranked Myanmar where 88% give. This ranking is one element in research carried out by the Charities Aid Foundation, which assesses how generous countries are by looking at three different kinds of helping behaviors: helping a stranger, volunteering time to an organization, and donating money to a charity. In 2018, Indonesia took first place on the overall ranking, ahead of Australia and New Zealand, with the United States in fourth place followed by Ireland and the United Kingdom.²

Beneath these encouraging numbers, however, is a less encouraging picture, at least as concerns those who live in extreme poverty. According to *Giving USA 2019*, the most authoritative report on U.S. charity, the largest portion of the money Americans give—29%—goes to religious institutions, where it pays for the salaries of the clergy and for building and maintaining churches,

synagogues, and mosques. Some of that—but according to a survey of 2,200 churches, only five cents in every dollar donated—is passed on to missions, both domestic and international, and missions may, in addition to seeking converts, provide aid. So it seems that aid for developing countries is likely to be only a fraction of that 5% of the total amount donated to religious institutions.³ The next biggest sector is education, including universities, colleges, and libraries. Again, a small percentage of that goes toward scholarships to students from low-income countries, or to fund research that can help reduce poverty and disease in those countries. *Giving USA 2019* lumps donations to international aid organizations in with gifts to other organizations that do not give aid to the poor but, for example, run international exchange programs or do work for international peace and security. This entire category received only 5% of all U.S. charitable giving, a figure that was down from the previous year, and amounted to less than \$23 billion.⁴

As someone who has chosen to read this book, you are probably among those who give to charity or who volunteer in their community; despite that, you may be less inclined to give a substantial portion of your income to save the lives of those living in extreme poverty in faraway places. Charity begins at home, the saying goes, and for many people, charity also stops at home, or not very far from it.

There are various ways in which my friends, colleagues, students, and lecture audiences express their resistance to giving to charity. You can see these objections in columns, letters, and blogs too. One particularly interesting set of comments was made by students taking an elective called Literature and Justice at Glennview High (that's not its real name), a school in a wealthy Boston suburb. As part of the reading for the course, teachers gave students an article

that I wrote for *The New York Times* in 1999, laying out a version of the argument you have just read, and asked them to write papers in response.⁵ Scott Seider, then a graduate student at Harvard University researching how adolescents think about obligations to others, interviewed 38 students in two sections of the course and read their papers.⁶ What the students said is worth examining, because it reflects a line of thought prevalent in affluent America.

Perhaps the most fundamental objection comes from Kathryn, a Glennview student who believes we shouldn't judge people who refuse to give:

There is no black and white universal code for everyone. It is better to accept that everyone has a different view on the issue, and all people are entitled to follow their own beliefs.

Kathryn leaves it to the individual to determine his or her moral obligation to the poor. But while circumstances do make a difference, and we should avoid being too black and white in our judgments, this doesn't mean we should accept that everyone is entitled to follow his or her own beliefs. That is moral relativism, a position that many find attractive only until they are faced with someone who is doing something really, really wrong. Suppose that we see a person holding a cat's paws on an electric grill that is gradually heating up, and when we vigorously object, he says, "But it's fun, see how the cat squeals." We don't just say, "Oh, well, you are entitled to follow your own beliefs," and leave him alone. We can and do try to stop people who are cruel to animals, just as we try to stop rapists, racists, and terrorists. I'm not saying that failing to give is comparable to committing these acts of violence, but if we reject moral relativism in some situations, then we should reject it everywhere.

After reading my essay, Douglas, another Glennview student, objected that I “should not have the right to tell people what to do.” In one sense, he’s correct about that. I’ve no authority over Douglas or over you. You don’t have to do as I say. On the other hand, I do have the right of free speech, which I’m exercising right now by offering you some arguments you might consider before you decide what to do with your money. I hope that you will want to listen to a variety of views before making up your mind about such an important issue. If I’m wrong about that, though, you are free to shut the book now, and there’s nothing I can do about it.

It’s possible, of course, to think that morality is not relative, and that we should talk about it, but that the right view is that we aren’t under any obligation to give anything at all. Lucy, another Glennview High student, wrote as follows:

If someone wants to buy a new car, they should. If someone wants to redecorate their house, they should, and if they need a suit, get it. They work for their money and they have the right to spend it on themselves.

You’ve probably already had this thought: You’ve worked hard to get where you are now, so haven’t you earned a right to enjoy it? Isn’t capitalism so productive precisely because it rewards people for working hard and taking risks? As someone wrote in what was listed on Amazon as the “Top Critical Review” of the first edition of this book:

Sure, no one needs a yacht or 20,000-square-foot house, but are people who spend their money on lesser excesses, such as a nice computer or a real leather jacket, inherently terrible, neglectful citizens of the world, because they

have spent their money on themselves instead of paying it forward and helping out those in need?⁷

From that perspective this idea of reward for effort seems fair—and of course, I never said that people who spend money on themselves are “inherently terrible.” Yet, when thinking about fairness, you might also consider that if you are a middle-class person in a developed country, you were privileged to be born into social and economic circumstances that make it possible for people who work hard and have the right abilities to achieve a very comfortable standard of living. In other places, you might have ended up poor, no matter how hard you worked. Warren Buffett, one of the world’s richest people, acknowledged as much when he said that he had a talent for picking stocks, but added: “If you stick me down in the middle of Bangladesh or Peru, you’ll find out how much this talent is going to produce in the wrong kind of soil.”⁸ Nobel Prize-winning economist and social scientist Herbert Simon estimated that “social capital” is responsible for at least 90% of what people earn in wealthy societies.⁹ Simon was talking about living in a society with good institutions, such as an efficient banking system, a police force that will protect you from criminals, and courts to which you can turn with reasonable hope of a just decision if someone breaches a contract with you. Infrastructure in the form of roads, communications, and a reliable power supply is also part of our social capital. Without these, you will struggle to escape poverty, no matter how hard you work. And most of the poor do work at least as hard as you or I. They have little choice, even though they almost always work in conditions that most people in rich nations would never tolerate. Work in poor countries is more likely to involve hard physical labor, because there are fewer machines to do the jobs,

and if there are any occupational health and safety regulations, they are unlikely to be enforced. If poor people are not working, it is probably because unemployment is higher in poor nations than in rich ones, and that is not the fault of the poor.

Lucy said that people have a right to spend the money they earn on themselves. Even if we agree with that, having a *right* to do something doesn't settle the question of what you *should* do. If you have a right to do something, I can't justifiably force you not to do it, but I can still tell you that you would be a fool to do it, or that it would be a horrible thing to do, or that you would be wrong to do it. You may have a right to spend your weekend playing video games, but it can still be true that you ought to visit your sick mother. Similarly, we might say that the rich have a right to spend their money on yachts or 20,000-square-foot houses or, for that matter, to flush wads of it down the toilet. We may also accept that those of us with more modest means shouldn't be forced to forgo any of the less-expensive pleasures that offer us some relief from all the time we spend working. But we could still think that to choose to do these things rather than use the money to save human lives is wrong, and shows that you are, as the Amazon reviewer put it, an "inherently terrible, neglectful citizen of the world." I'm not saying that we *should* think that—I'll say more about that in the final three chapters of this book—but there is no contradiction between that view, and the view that people have a right to spend their money as they choose.

If we have the right to do as we wish with our money, that right would provide the basis for an objection to any attempt to force the rich to give their money away, or to attempts to take it from them, for example by taxation. But I am not arguing here for

higher taxation or any other coercive means of increasing support for people living in extreme poverty; I am talking about what we should choose to do with our money if we are to live ethically. At the same time, I'm not arguing against a governmental role in reducing global poverty. Whether governments should play such a role is a separate question from the argument I am making. My aim is to convince you, the individual reader, that you can and should be doing a lot more to help the poor.

Libertarians resist the idea that we have a duty to help others. Canadian philosopher Jan Narveson articulates that point of view:

We are certainly responsible for evils we inflict on others, no matter where, and we owe those people compensation . . . Nevertheless, I have seen no plausible argument that we owe something, as a matter of general duty, to those to whom we have done nothing wrong.¹⁰

There is, at first glance, something attractive about the political philosophy that says: "You leave me alone, and I'll leave you alone, and we'll get along just fine." It appeals to the frontier mentality, to an ideal of life in the wide-open spaces where each of us can carve out our own territory and live undisturbed by the neighbors. Yet there is a callous side to a philosophy that denies that we have any responsibilities to those who, through no fault of their own, are in need. Taking libertarianism seriously would require us to abolish all state-supported welfare programs for those who can't get a job or are ill or disabled, and all state-funded health care for the aged and for those who are too poor to pay for their own health insurance. Few people really support such extreme views. Most think that we do have obligations to

those we can help with relatively little sacrifice—certainly to those living in our own country, and I would argue that we can't justifiably draw the boundary there. But if I have not persuaded you of that, there is another line of argument to consider: If we have, in fact, been at least in part a cause of the poverty of the world's poorest people—if we are *harming* the poor—then even libertarians like Narveson will have to agree that we ought to compensate them.

Some people imagine that the wealth of the world is a static quantity, like a pie that must be divided among a lot of people. In that model, the bigger the slice the rich get, the less there is for the poor. If that really were how the world works, then a relatively small elite would be inflicting a terrible injustice on everyone else, for just 1% of the world's people own 45% of the world's wealth, and less than 10% own 84% of the wealth. At the other end of the spectrum, 64% of the world's people own only 2% of the world's wealth.¹¹ A 2019 Oxfam report makes an even more dramatic claim: the world's 26 richest people own as much as the poorest 50% of the global population. And the concentration of wealth in a few hands is increasing—just two years earlier, it took 61 of the world's richest people to own as much as the poorest 50%.¹² Dramatic as these figures are, however, they don't address the question of whether the extraordinary wealth of a few people has caused others to become poorer. The world's wealth is not fixed in size; it is vastly richer now than it was, say, 1,000 years ago. By finding better ways to create what people want, entrepreneurs make themselves rich, but they don't necessarily make others poorer. This book is about extreme poverty, which means not having enough to meet your basic needs, and those of your dependents. That is an absolute standard, not a relative

one. So the unequal distribution of the world's wealth—startling though it is—is not sufficient to show that the accumulation of immense wealth by a few billionaires has harmed the poor.

There are many ways in which it is clear, however, that the rich *have* harmed the poor. Ale Nodye knows about one of them. He grew up in a village by the sea, in the West African country of Senegal. His father and grandfather were fishermen, and he tried to be one too. But after six years in which he barely caught enough fish to pay for the fuel for his boat, he set out by canoe for the Canary Islands, from where he hoped to become another of Europe's many illegal immigrants. Instead, he was arrested and deported. But he says he will try again, even though the voyage is dangerous and one of his cousins died on a similar trip. He has no choice, he says, because "there are no fish in the sea here anymore." A European Commission report shows that Nodye is right: The fish stocks from which Nodye's father and grandfather took their catch and fed their families have been destroyed by industrial fishing fleets that come from Europe, China, and Russia and sell their fish to well-fed Europeans who can afford to pay high prices. The industrial fleets drag vast nets across the seabed, damaging the coral reefs where fish breed. As a result, a major protein source for poor people has dwindled, and people who used to make a living fishing are unemployed, or in some cases have turned to hunting dolphins and whales, including some from endangered species. Despite attempts to regulate fishing in African coastal waters, one study estimated that illegal industrial fishing trawlers take \$300 million worth of fish out of Senegalese waters alone, with the total for West Africa estimated at \$1.3 billion. This story is repeated in many other coastal areas around the world.¹³

Another way in which we in affluent nations are harming the poor has become increasingly clear over the past decades. President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda put it plainly, addressing the industrialized countries at a 2007 meeting of the African Union: “You are causing aggression to us by causing global warming . . . Alaska will probably become good for agriculture, Siberia will probably become good for agriculture, but where does that leave Africa?”¹⁴

Strong language, but the accusation is difficult to deny. Nearly half of the greenhouse gases now in the atmosphere have come from the United States and Europe. Without those gases, there would be no human-induced global warming problem. Africa’s contribution is, by comparison, extremely modest: less than 3% of the global emissions from burning fuel since 1751, somewhat more if land clearing and methane emissions from livestock production are included, but still a small fraction of what has been contributed by the industrialized nations.¹⁵ And while every nation will have some problems in adjusting to climate change, the hardship will, as Museveni suggests, fall disproportionately on the poor in the regions of the world closer to the equator. The International Monetary Fund has estimated that for a country with an average annual temperature of 25°C—such as Bangladesh, Haiti, or Gabon—a 1°C increase in temperature would reduce per capita output by up to 1.5%.¹⁶ This reduction in per capita output will not apply to Europe, the United States, Canada, and other older industrialized nations with much lower average temperatures.¹⁷

Some scientists believe that precipitation will decrease nearer the equator and increase nearer the poles. In any case, the rainfall upon which hundreds of millions rely to grow their

food will become less reliable. Moreover, the poor nations depend on agriculture to a far greater degree than the rich. In the United States, farm output is only about 1% of the economy; in Sierra Leone it is 60%. In Malawi, 80% of the population are small-scale farmers, virtually all of whom are dependent on rainfall.¹⁸

Nor will drought be the only problem climate change brings to the poor. Residents of Ghoramara Island, one of the Sunderban islands in the Bay of Bengal, are already seeking resettlement, as rising sea levels cause flooding and salinity. Soon this is likely to happen on a much larger scale.¹⁹ Densely settled delta regions that are home to tens of millions of people in Egypt, Bangladesh, India, and Vietnam are especially vulnerable to inundation from small increases in sea level. Small Pacific Island nations that consist of low-lying coral atolls, like Kiribati and Tuvalu, are in similar danger, and it seems inevitable that in a few decades they will be submerged.²⁰

The evidence is overwhelming that the greenhouse gas emissions of the industrialized nations have harmed, and are continuing to harm, many of the world's poorest people—along with many richer ones. If we accept that those who harm others must compensate them, we cannot deny that the industrialized nations owe compensation to many of the world's poorest people. The International Monetary Fund has estimated that the developing economies will need climate adaptation investment of \$80 billion a year until 2050. In 2014, only \$9.3 billion was being invested for that purpose. The International Monetary Fund added: "On equity grounds, there is some appeal in linking climate finance donations from advanced economies to their contribution to climate change."²¹ That claim is more cautiously

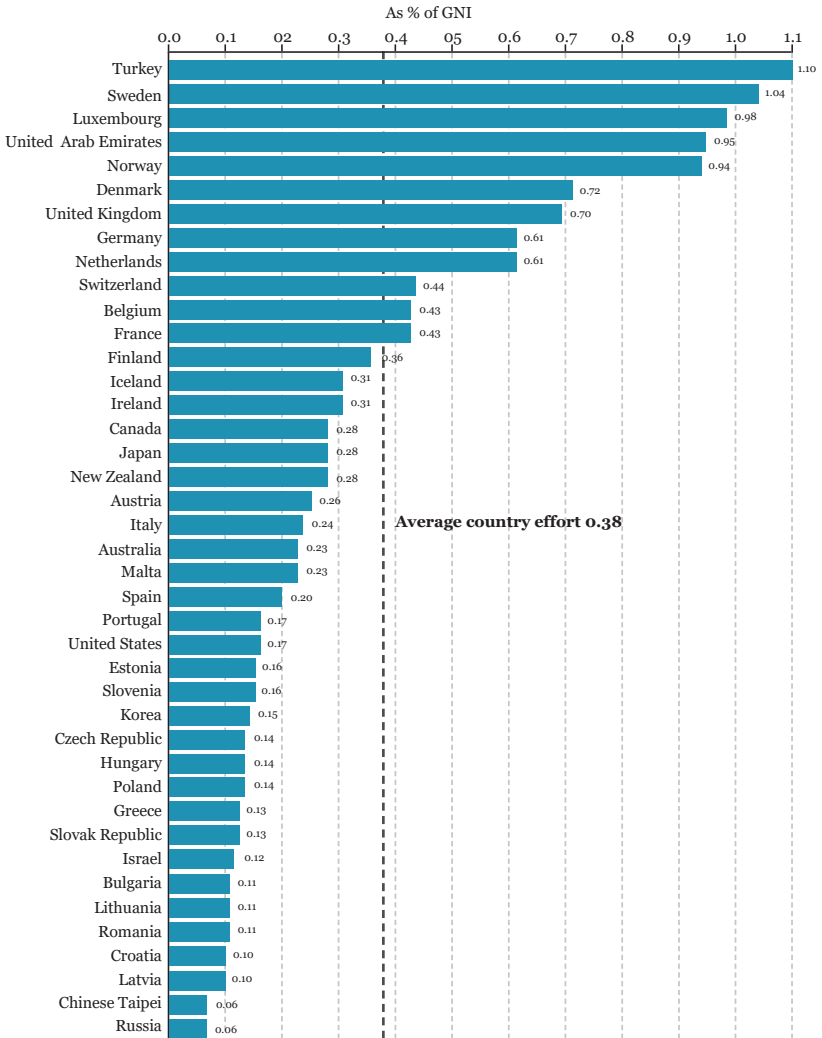
expressed than the remark from President Museveni that I quoted earlier, and therefore more difficult to disagree with, but it shares a common assumption: that the industrialized nations have harmed, and are continuing to harm, the poorer and more vulnerable nations.

In a world that has no more capacity to absorb greenhouse gases without the consequence of damaging climate change, the philosophy of “You leave me alone, and I’ll leave you alone” has become almost impossible to live by, for it requires ceasing to put any more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Otherwise, we simply are not leaving others alone.

We are a generous nation. Our government is already giving more than our share of foreign aid, and we are paying for that through our taxes. Isn't that sufficient?

When Americans are asked whether the United States gives more, less, or about the same amount of aid, as a percentage of its income, as other wealthy countries, only 1 in 20 Americans gives the correct answer. As we can see from the graph below, in 2018, the most generous nations were Turkey and Sweden, both giving more than 1% of their gross national income. Luxembourg, the United Arab Emirates, Norway, Denmark, and the United Kingdom also met or exceeded the United Nations target of 0.7% of their national income—that’s 70 cents in every \$100 the nation earns. The average among all the donor members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (better known as the OECD) that give foreign aid was 0.38% of gross national income. The United States gave just 0.17%, on a par with Portugal, below France, Italy, Japan, and Spain, and only above countries that are obviously much less wealthy, like Greece, Poland, Hungary, and Russia.

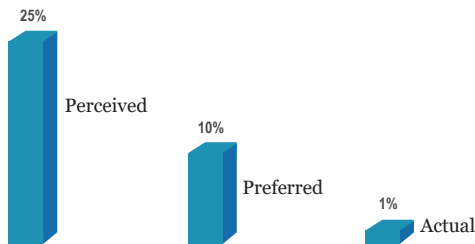
Official Aid As a Percentage of Gross National Income (2018)²²



In U.S. politics, it is often taken as a given that there is little support for foreign aid. Surveys have frequently asked Americans whether the United States is spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on foreign aid. In earlier decades, as many as 7

out of 10 said “too much.” A 2017 poll conducted by the University of Maryland Program for Public Consultation found that this had fallen to 59%, and in other polls it has been as low as 49%. That is good news, but even these lower numbers greatly overestimate the number of Americans who would say that the country gives too much foreign aid if they had an accurate understanding of how little aid their country really gives. In 2015, the Kaiser Family Foundation asked Americans what portion of government spending (not national income) goes to foreign aid. The average response was that 26% of government spending went towards assisting other countries. The correct answer is less than 1%. This is no aberration—the result is broadly representative of other polls taken by Kaiser and by others that have asked the same question, going back to the 1990s. The 2015 Kaiser poll also asked whether the United States spends too much on foreign aid, and 56% said that it does. Once they were told that less than 1% of the federal budget is for foreign aid, that number was cut in half, to 28%. Other polls have asked what would be an appropriate percentage of the federal budget to go to foreign aid, and the median answer is 10%. In other words, a majority of Americans think that the federal government is spending too much on foreign aid, but when asked how much the government should spend, they give a figure that is ten times current spending!²³

Foreign Aid as a Percentage of the Federal Budget²⁴



The columns represent the median responses to a 2010 United States poll by WorldPublicOpinion.org/Knowledge Networks and is in line with other U.S. polls carried out since 1995.

Source: <http://worldpublicopinion.net/american-public-vastly-overestimates-amount-of-u-s-foreign-aid>

It's not only Americans who are misinformed about how much foreign aid their country gives. A 2018 Lowy Institute poll found that the average Australian believes that 14% of the federal budget is spent on foreign aid, when the real figure is only 0.8%. Just like Americans, most Australians do not support an increase in foreign aid, yet when asked to name what would be the right proportion of the federal budget to devote to foreign aid, they propose 10%!²⁵ Although Australia's 2017 foreign aid budget represents, at 0.23% of gross national income, a slightly higher proportion than the United States, it is still a very low figure given that in 2018 Australia took over from Switzerland the title of the country with the highest median wealth per adult in the world—meaning that the typical Australian is, with assets worth US\$191,450, richer than the typical person in any other country. In comparison, the typical resident of the United Kingdom has assets worth US\$97,170, and of the United States, just US\$61,670.²⁶ You would think, therefore, that Australia could at least match the U.K.'s aid spending of 0.7% of gross national income, instead of giving only one-third of that figure.

Some Americans claim that the U.S. figures for official aid are misleading because America gives much more than other countries in private aid. But although the United States gives more private aid than most rich nations, according to OECD statistics, even its private giving trails that of Canada and is no higher than that of Ireland—both countries that give a higher proportion of their national income as government aid than the United States does. Adding U.S. nongovernmental aid of 17 cents per \$100 earned to U.S. government aid, which happens to be at the same level, leaves America's total aid contribution at no more than 34 cents of every \$100 earned. Comparable statistics on nongovernment aid are not available for the United Kingdom, Sweden, Norway, Luxembourg,

Turkey, or the United Arab Emirates, but the official aid alone of the United Kingdom is, at 0.7% of gross national income, twice the level of the U.S. aid including both government and nongovernment aid, while in 2018 all of the other countries just mentioned gave official aid at, or close to, three times the U.S. total for official and nongovernment aid.²⁷

Public misconceptions about aid—which as we have seen are not limited to the United States—are a barrier to political leaders who might wish to increase their country’s foreign aid to reach the United Nations target of 0.7% of gross national income. Being aware of how much—or rather how little—your country contributes is a first step to increasing it. If you live in a country that is lagging behind other countries in the proportion of gross national income given as foreign aid, then donating money yourself is not the only thing you can do. It is also important to be an active citizen in informing others about how little your country gives and letting your political representatives know that you want your country to develop an effective foreign aid program that meets the United Nations target of giving at least 0.7% of gross national income.

Philanthropy is just a band-aid, addressing the symptoms but not the causes of global poverty.

If those on the right fear that I am encouraging the state to seize their money and give it to the world’s poor, some on the left worry that encouraging the rich to donate to charities enables them to salve their consciences while they continue to benefit from a global economic system that makes them rich and keeps billions poor.²⁸ Philanthropy, philosopher Paul Gomberg believes, promotes “political quietism,” deflecting attention from the institutional

causes of poverty—essentially, in his view, capitalism—and from the need to find radical alternatives to these institutions.²⁹

I believe we ought to give a larger portion of our income to organizations combating poverty, but I am open-minded about the best way to combat poverty.³⁰ Some organizations—Oxfam for example—are engaged in emergency relief, development aid, and advocacy work for a fairer deal for low-income countries. Suppose, however, that after investigating the causes of global poverty and considering what approach is most likely to reduce it, you conclude that the only way to end extreme poverty is a systematic transformation of the global economic order. Does that imply that you should not donate to effective charities working to help people in extreme poverty, and instead should put all your resources into bringing about that systematic transformation? No, it does not, or at least not without first answering some crucial questions. What kind of transformation would you like to see? Not, presumably, the alternatives to capitalism that were tried in the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, Cambodia, or any of the other 20th century regimes that set out to abolish capitalism, for none of them has worked out well. (China is still nominally communist, but anyone who has spent time there can see that capitalism has been reintroduced and is flourishing.) Next, if you can describe what kind of transformation you would like to see, can you describe a feasible path to it? More important still, is there anything you can do that will make that path more likely to be taken, and the transformation achieved? Only if you can answer these questions affirmatively would it make sense to put your time, energy, and money into organizations promoting the desired transformation to the global economic system. If there is no real chance of achieving the systematic change you are seeking, or no way in which you can make it more likely to happen,

then rather than waste your time and resources on grand plans that will prove futile, it is much better to look for a strategy that may not end extreme poverty completely, but will reduce the hardships and suffering experienced by at least some of the people now living in extreme poverty. After all, if you can't heal the wound, that's not a reason for refusing a band-aid.

Giving people money or food breeds dependency.

I agree that we should not be giving food directly to the poor, except in emergencies like a drought, earthquake, or flood, where food may need to be brought in to keep people from starving in the short term. In less dire situations, providing food can make people dependent. If the food is shipped in from another country, it can destroy local markets and reduce incentives for local farmers to produce a surplus to sell. We need to make it possible for people to produce their own food and meet their other needs in a sustainable manner and by their own work.

In the first edition of this book, I also agreed that we should not be giving money directly to the poor. But in 2009, four Harvard and MIT graduate students studying development economics decided to see what would happen if they gave poor families in Kenya money with no strings attached. What would they do with it? One view is that if you give poor people cash, they will spend it on alcohol, prostitutes, or gambling, and in a short time they won't be any better off. Another view, favored by many economists, is that no one knows better than the people themselves what will benefit them, so why not give them the cash and let them decide? The students decided to find out, using their own money to give participating families the equivalent of about \$1,000. The results were promising. Many of the recipients used the money to replace

their leaky thatched roof with a metal one that enabled them to keep themselves and their food supplies dry. In the long run, the roof paid for itself, because thatched roofs have to be replaced each year, but poor families were unable to save up enough to buy a metal roof. Spending on alcohol, as a proportion of total income, did not increase.³¹

In 2012, the same four researchers—Michael Faye, Paul Niehaus, Jeremy Shapiro, and Rohit Wanchoo—launched a nonprofit called GiveDirectly that raises funds online in order to transfer them, again about \$1,000 per family, to people living in extreme poverty in Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda. The founders committed themselves to being completely transparent, and to conduct rigorous randomized trials—the “gold standard” used for determining whether new drugs or other medical procedures are effective—to see whether the families that received the money were, after a period of years, better off than similar families that did not. Their results, which are borne out by other trials of cash transfers, have demonstrated that giving money to poor families:

- Does not reduce the amount that adults work, but does reduce child labor;
- Raises school attendance;
- Increases economic autonomy;
- Increases women’s decision-making power;
- Leads to greater diversity in diet;
- Stimulates more use of health services.³²

In 2017, GiveDirectly launched a trial of a universal basic income scheme, guaranteeing sufficient income to meet basic needs for 12 years, and again running a controlled study to see what lasting

impact the additional income will have. At the end of 2018, the number of households to which GiveDirectly had provided cash transfers since the organization was founded had passed 100,000.

GiveDirectly has changed my attitude to giving money to the poor. It clearly does have positive effects. But will providing a guaranteed basic income create greater dependency than a single cash transfer? And are cash transfers more effective than other forms of aid? We do not yet have sufficient evidence to answer these questions. In Chapter 7, we shall see that an approach that includes a cash transfer, but also offers training and other benefits, may do even better than giving an amount of cash equivalent to the costs of the program; but to know if it really is better will require additional long-term studies.

Cash is the seed corn of capitalism. Giving it away will reduce future growth.

Gaetano Cipriano contacted me after reading one of my articles because he thought that as an entrepreneurial capitalist, he could offer a helpful perspective. The grandson of immigrants to America, he owns and runs EI Associates, an engineering and construction firm based in Cedar Knolls, New Jersey, that has assets of around \$80 million. “Cash is the seed corn of capitalism” is his phrase. Cipriano told me that he deploys his capital to the best of his ability to promote profits and enduring growth, and that giving more of it away than he already does would be “cutting my own throat.” But he does not spend extravagantly. “I do not live in a splendid house,” he told me. “I have no second home. I drive a 2001 Ford Explorer with 73,000 miles. I belong to a nice squash club, and have four suits and two pairs of black

shoes. When I take vacations, they are short and local. I do not own a boat or a plane.” While he does give to charity, he does it “at a level which is prudent and balanced with sustainable growth.” If he were to give much more money away, it would have to come out of sums that he now reinvests in his business. That, in turn, would reduce his future earnings and perhaps the number of people he is able to employ, or how well he can pay them. It would also leave him with less to give if, later in life, he decides that he wants to give more.

Twelve years after our first contact, as I began work on this updated edition, I asked Cipriano how his business was doing, and whether either his lifestyle or his charitable giving had changed. He was doing well, having more than doubled his assets over that 12-year period. He had swapped his Ford for a GMC Terrain, which he bought second-hand. He was living in the same house as before, and in his words: “I still don’t have a house at the shore, a boat, a plane, or a mistress.” His major indulgence was spending \$500,000 to build a doubles squash court, which he and his friends use a lot. But though he wasn’t spending significantly more on himself and his family, he also wasn’t giving in the way this book advocates. The focus of his charitable giving is the Squash and Education Alliance, which runs youth programs combining squash, academics, mentoring, travel, college support, and career readiness, mostly in the United States. He is also the major supporter of a soup kitchen run by St John’s Roman Catholic Church in Newark, New Jersey, where his late father attended mass and supported the church’s good works. He and his mother now continue this, in memory of his father. When a structural fault became evident in an old parish building, his engineering firm designed repairs, at no charge. “I

can't change the world, but I try to make my little corner of the world a little bit better every day," is how Cipriano describes his philanthropy. He plans to pass ownership of his business on to his children.

No doubt someone who works hard, lives modestly, provides good jobs, reinvests profits to expand and provide more jobs, and gives to local good causes is playing a valuable role benefiting the local community and the broader economy. Paradoxically, for someone who evidently knows how to get the most out of his money, even to the extent of buying a used car, Cipriano lets this requirement slip when it comes to philanthropy. In this respect his giving contrasts with that of another example of someone with a keen eye for value: Warren Buffett. Buffett is often cited as a reason for *not* giving away one's first million dollars. Had Buffett done so, he would not have had the investment capital he needed to develop his business, and would never have earned the \$31 billion that he has already donated to the Gates Foundation. He plans to give most of his vast fortune to the Gates Foundation because he sees that improving health and stimulating economic growth in the world's poorest communities is much more cost-effective than giving in the United States. If you are as skilled as Buffett in investing your money, I urge you to keep it until late in life, too, and then give away most of it, as he is doing. But people with less spectacular investment abilities might do more good by giving it away sooner and directing it to where it will go the furthest and do the most good.

Claude Rosenberg, who died in 2008, was the founder and chairman of RCM Capital Management, an institutional money management firm, so he knew something about investing. He also knew a lot about philanthropy. He founded a group called

New Tithing and wrote *Wealthy and Wise: How You and America Can Get the Most Out of Your Giving*. He argued that giving now is often better than investing your money and giving later, because the longer social problems are left unchecked, the worse they get. In other words, just as capital grows when invested, so the costs of fixing social problems are likely to grow. And, in Rosenberg's view, the rate at which the cost of fixing social problems grows is "exponentially greater" than the rate of return on capital.³³ In support of this view, Rosenberg pointed to the cascading impact of poverty and other social problems, not just on one person, but on future generations and society at large. The claim is a broad one, difficult to prove or disprove; but, if it is true for poverty in the United States, then it is even more likely to hold for poverty in low-income countries, in part because it is easier to get a high percentage return when starting from a low base.

Still, this does not entirely address the idea that when citizens of a high-income country give money away, they are harming the economy of their own country. In response to my earlier writings, that objection was forcefully put by Colin McGinn, then a professor of philosophy at the University of Miami:

What if you took every penny you ever had and gave it to the poor of Africa . . . ? What we would have is no economy, no ability to generate new wealth or help anybody.³⁴

It isn't clear whether McGinn's "you" is you, the individual reader, or the group an American Southerner might refer to as "y'all." If you [insert your name] took every penny you ever had and gave it to the poor of Africa, our national economy would not notice. Even if every reader of this book did that, the economy

would barely hiccup (unless the book's readership exceeds my wildest dreams). If *everyone* in America did it though, the national economy would be ruined. But, at the moment, there is no cause for worry about this last possibility: there is no sign of it happening, and anyway, I am not advocating it.

It is precisely because so few people give significant amounts that the need for more to be given is so great. This great need means that the more each one of us gives, the more lives we can save. If *everyone* gave significantly more than they now give, however, we would be in a totally different situation. The huge gulf between rich and poor means that if everyone were giving, there would be no need for them to take every penny they ever had and give it all to the poor of Africa. As you'll see before you get to the end of this book, quite a modest contribution from everyone who has enough to live comfortably would suffice to achieve the goal of lifting most of the world's extremely poor people above the poverty line of \$1.90 per day. If that modest contribution were given, we would no longer be in a situation in which children go blind due to vitamin A deficiency, or get malaria because they don't have anti-malarial medication or bed nets, or die from diarrhea when they could have been saved by treatments costing pennies. So whether a small number of people give a lot, or a large number of people give a little, ending large-scale extreme poverty wouldn't cripple the economies of affluent countries. It would leave plenty of scope for entrepreneurial activity and individual wealth. Moreover, in the long run, the global economy would be enhanced, not diminished, by bringing into it the 736 million people now outside it, creating new markets and new opportunities for trade and investment.

Another philosopher, Alan Ryan, who has taught at Oxford, Princeton, and Stanford Universities, has a different response to my views:

People do have special relationships with their families, their communities, and their countries. This is the standard equipment of humanity, and most people, in all of human history, have seen nothing wrong with it.³⁵

It is true that most of us care more about our family, friends, and community than we do about strangers. That's natural, and there is nothing wrong with it. But how far should such preferences go? Brendan, a Glennview High student, thought that instead of giving to aid the poor, whatever spare funds we may have "can be better spent helping your family and friends who need the money as well." If family and friends really *need* the money, in anything remotely like the way those living in extreme poverty need it, it would be going too much against the grain of human nature to object to giving to them before giving to strangers. Fortunately, most middle-class people in rich nations don't have to make this choice. They can take care of their families in an entirely sufficient way on much less than they are now spending, and thus have money left over that can be used to help those in extreme poverty. Admittedly, saying just where the balance should be struck is difficult. I'll return to that question later in the book.

Kiernan, another Glennview High School student, made a point similar to Alan Ryan's:

[Giving what we don't need to the poor] would make the world a better, more equal place. But it is like a little kid buying a pack of candy, keeping one piece, and giving the rest away. It just doesn't happen.

The issue raised by all these remarks is the link between what we humans typically do, and what we *ought* to do. When Brendan O’Grady, a philosophy student at Queen’s University in Ontario, posted a blog about this issue, he got the following response from another Canadian philosophy student, Thomas Simmons:

Of course I do not want people to die, but I just feel generally unattached to them. I have no doubt that if I were to take a trip to places where people are starving then I might think differently, but as it stands now they are just too far removed. In not making these donations, I am implicitly valuing the affluence of my own life over the basic sustenance of many others. And, well, I guess I do. Am I immoral for doing so? Maybe.³⁶

When O’Grady queried this, Simmons clarified his position: “I don’t intend to make a moral defense, but rather just reveal my personal feelings—that is, just to explain how I feel.” The distinction between describing how things are and saying how they ought to be is also relevant to what Kiernan and Alan Ryan are saying. The fact that we tend to favor our families, communities, and countries may explain our failure to save the lives of the poor beyond those boundaries, but it does not justify that failure from an ethical perspective, no matter how many generations of our ancestors have seen nothing wrong with it. Still, a good explanation of why we behave as we do is an important first step toward understanding to what extent change is possible.

Gaetano Cipriano offers a different justification for giving to his local community. “There are plenty of needs right here in New Jersey,” he says. Perhaps more influential than that, though, is the fact that he is personally acquainted with the priest who runs

the St John's Church soup kitchen, and with the person who runs the Squash and Education Alliance, as well as people who run their programs in different cities. This, he says, is how he knows that his money is being spent properly, efficiently, and cost-effectively, and the charities get "real, measurable, tangible results." On the other hand, he tells me, "I don't know anybody in Africa."

There are people in New Jersey with unmet needs, of course. But can they be met cost-effectively? If we focus only on the relative cost-effectiveness of helping people in need in the United States, then yes, perhaps the charities to which Cipriano donates are cost-effective. If, however, we take a global perspective, as we shall see in more detail in Chapter 6, helping people in an affluent country cannot compete, for cost-effectiveness, with helping people in extreme poverty in low-income countries. Nor is the lack of a personal contact with anyone in a low-income country a justification for not donating to help people there. There are, as we shall see, rigorous charity evaluators that can do a better job of checking the "real, measurable, tangible results" obtained by charities than donors who are not prepared to put hundreds of hours of work into assessing the charities to which they donate, and are unlikely to have the expertise to do this properly even if they were willing to put in the hours.

Aren't we just pouring money down a black hole?

After the first edition of this book was published, I did a lot of interviews about it. Some of them were on radio programs where listeners could call in, and one of the most common objections I received was that we have already given huge amounts of money to help poor people in low-income countries and yet there are

still many millions living in extreme poverty, so isn't it all just a hopeless, insoluble problem?

As we saw in Chapter 1, that response shows ignorance of some of the most important facts of the past 50 years. It's true, of course, that there are still millions—and even hundreds of millions—of people in extreme poverty, but in a world with 7.6 billion inhabitants, that is quite a small proportion. In fact, the proportion of the human population unable to meet their basic needs is, like the proportion of children dying before reaching their fifth birthday, very probably the lowest it has ever been in the entire existence of our species.³⁷ Certainly life expectancy today is higher than it has ever been.³⁸ Go back two centuries, to 1800. In the country with the world's highest life expectancy—Belgium—a newborn citizen had a life expectancy of just 40 years. In India, the figure was only 25 years. Today, life expectancy in every country in the world is over 50. A child born in Sierra Leone today can expect to live a decade longer than a child born in Belgium in 1800.

So the idea that we are making no progress is a myth; but why is the myth so widespread? If you were not living under a rock in 2018, you would know about the 12 boys and their soccer coach who were trapped in a cave in Thailand—it made headlines around the world for several days. It's good that the 12 boys and their coach were saved, of course, but let's compare that with the steady decline in child mortality over the past decades, from about 12.5 million each year in 1990 to 5.5 million in 2015. That is a drop from more than 34,000 deaths per day to about 15,000. This means that, on average, during these 25 years, on any given day, 746 fewer children died than had died just the day before. So every single day, for 25 years, newspapers could have had a banner headline: "746 CHILDREN SAVED TODAY!" The problem is that

12 identifiable children trapped in a cave makes for a gripping news story, while 746 fewer children dying each day — when no one can point to a particular child and say that child would have died had she not been immunized against measles, or not slept under a bed net — doesn't make the news at all.

There Are Too Many People Already!

When speaking to audiences about global poverty, I'm often challenged by people who say that our planet already has more people than it can sustain, and saving lives of poor people now will only mean that more will die when, inevitably, we run out of food and the population crashes.

That challenge is evidence of the continuing resonance of the thought of the 18th-century English economist and clergyman Thomas Malthus, who claimed that population growth would always outstrip food supplies. If epidemics and plagues did not keep human population in check, he wrote, "gigantic inevitable famine" would do so.³⁹ Two centuries later, in 1968, Paul Ehrlich warned in his bestseller *The Population Bomb* that we had already lost the battle to feed humanity. He predicted that by 1985, the world would be swept by "vast famines" in which "hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death."⁴⁰

Fortunately, Malthus and Ehrlich were both wrong. In the half-century after Ehrlich made his dire prediction, food production grew strongly, on a per capita basis, and the proportion of people living in low-income countries who are not getting 2,200 calories per day—a basic sufficiency—declined from more than 1 in 2 to just 1 in 10, before ticking back up slightly after 2015. At the time of writing, the most recent estimate is that in 2017 there were 821 million people, or about 1 in 9 of the world's population,

facing chronic food deprivation.⁴¹

Today, although the world's population continues to grow, and is expected to reach 9.8 billion by 2050 and 11.2 billion by 2100, the world produces more than enough food to give everyone an adequate diet, or would, if it were all used to nourish people. The United States is the world's largest corn producer, but less than one-third of the U.S. corn crop is eaten by humans. Almost 40% of it is turned into ethanol, to be pumped into the gas tanks of American cars, and another 26% is fed to animals, along with millions of tons of other grains and soybeans. Worldwide, 36% of calories produced by crops is fed to animals, and of these, only 12% come back to us in the form of animal products. The rest—nearly a third of all the calories produced by the world's crops—is used by the animals themselves, to keep warm, or to develop parts of their bodies that we do not eat.⁴²

The world is not running out of food. The problem is that people in high-income countries have found a way to consume four or five times as much food as would be possible if they were to eat the crops we grow directly. Nevertheless, there are reasons for being concerned about the fact that population is growing most rapidly in the world's poorest countries. According to the United Nations Population Division, 26 African countries will at least double their present populations by 2050, and by 2100, Angola, Burundi, Niger, Somalia, Tanzania, and Zambia are expected to have five times as many people as they do today. Nigeria's population is also growing rapidly, and because it is starting from a much larger base, it is projected to have a population of 794 million by 2100, a figure that will then be exceeded only by India and China. Nigeria's growth is occurring in a country that, despite considerable oil revenue, now has a life expectancy of only

55 years, with 98% of its population either poor or low income, and 53% below the World Bank's extreme poverty line.⁴³

In some circles today, there is reluctance to talk about population growth. That is in part because earlier alarmist predictions of mass famine led to human rights abuses like forced sterilization and abortion. Another constraint on talking about population is the belief that white people, and especially white males, should not be telling African women how many children they should have. But African thought leaders are also saying that we need to talk about population. Alex Ezeh, who was educated at Imo State University and the University of Ibadan, both in Nigeria, has called population issues "an elephant in the room" and criticized the development community for ignoring it.⁴⁴

The right response to concerns about population growth in low-income countries, however, is emphatically not to say, as ecologist Garrett Hardin did in the 1970s, that we should cut off aid because giving aid only makes things worse.⁴⁵ That approach was based on what has proven to be grossly excessive confidence in our ability to predict the future. Hardin asserted that countries like India and Bangladesh had exceeded their "carrying capacity," and that providing assistance would only cause more to die when the inevitable famine occurred. The predicted catastrophic famines never happened, and today these countries have populations that are larger, but also better fed, than they were in the 1970s.

One reason why we should not cut off aid to countries with high population growth is that there is an abundance of evidence that reducing poverty also reduces fertility. In the words of Steven Sinding, a former Director-General of the International Planned Parenthood Federation: "That there is a causal relationship running from improved living standards to lower

fertility is no longer in much dispute.”⁴⁶ Where many children die and there is no Social Security, parents tend to have large families to ensure that some will survive to look after them in their old age, and, in the case of rural families, to work the land. As countries industrialize, living standards rise, more people move to cities, and fertility rates fall. This happened in Europe and North America, and then also in Asia and Latin America. Sub-Saharan Africa appears to be starting down the same path, especially in urban areas, although starting out from a high level of fertility, and with a very young population.⁴⁷

Educating girls also reduces fertility. In Mali, women with secondary education or higher have an average of three children, while those with no education have an average of seven children. In Guatemala, a long-term study found that each additional year a girl spent in school led to an increase of between six and ten months in the age at which she had her first child.⁴⁸ Kerala, which used to be one of the poorer states of India, demonstrates the impact of education on fertility. In the 1990s, although Kerala was poor, it had higher literacy and greater gender equality than much of the rest of India, and its women had an average of only 1.7 children, which was lower than Sweden or the United States, let alone other parts of India that have lower literacy and where the status of women is lower.⁴⁹ Today we can see that putting resources into education, literacy, and higher status for women has paid off. Kerala is no longer one of India’s poorer states. So when aid is a means of increasing literacy and gender equality, it can help achieve a sustainable population.

Still, in poor countries with high fertility rates, more direct measures of slowing fertility may be needed if population is to stabilize at a level that provides a minimally decent and

sustainable standard of living. But that doesn't reduce the importance of aid, either. Providing basic health care remains central to these efforts, because it is a way of reaching women and talking to them about contraception. According to the World Health Organization, in developing countries, there are 214 million women of reproductive age who would like to avoid pregnancy but are not using modern methods of contraception.⁵⁰ The belief that stopping population growth is an overriding priority is not a reason against donating to an effective charity; instead, it is a reason for donating to an organization like Population Services International, and asking that your gift be earmarked for family-planning projects.

How can I know that my donation will reach the people who I want to help, and make a positive difference in their lives?

One of the biggest changes in philanthropy and the international development community that has taken place since I first wrote this book is the increased focus of independent organizations on measuring the impact of particular interventions to help people in extreme poverty, and in assessing the effectiveness of the organizations providing the most successful interventions. GiveWell (which we'll get back to later in the book) was the pioneer here, setting new standards for rigorous evaluation of the work of charities. Thanks in part to the far-sighted generosity of Dustin Moskovitz and Cari Tuna, whose Good Ventures Foundation has supported its research, GiveWell has the capacity to investigate charities and find the most effective ones. Early on, it decided that nonprofits working in high-income countries were unlikely

to be able to match, in terms of the good they could do per dollar spent, those working in low-income countries. GiveWell's strict standards mean that if you go to their website and select one of their top-ranked charities, you can be confident that people in extreme poverty will benefit from your donation, and benefit in a manner that is highly cost-effective.

There is another organization that recommends highly effective organizations seeking to reduce extreme poverty and its consequences, and it owes its existence to this book, after which it is named. In 2012, I received an email from Charlie Bresler. He described himself as a former professor of psychology who “stumbled” into becoming president of a large retail chain. But he had never really felt that working in the corporate world was what he wanted to spend his life doing. Reading this book got him thinking about whether he could be helpful in promoting my ideas regarding helping people living in poverty. At that time, the book had a website that encouraged people to pledge to give a percentage of their income to help people in extreme poverty, and some volunteers were assisting me in turning the website into an organization, but, as so often happens with projects that lack an energetic full-time director, progress was slow. Charlie stepped in, very full-time—although still technically a volunteer, as he has never taken any pay for his many hours of work—and transformed *The Life You Can Save* into an organization that encourages people to give to nonprofit organizations vetted by independent research, and reaches out to a broad public audience to tell them how much of a difference they can make to the lives of others less fortunate than they are.