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Bystanders to Poverty

Peter Singer

10.1 THE ACTS AND OMISSIONS DOCTRINE

My copy of Jonathan Glover’s pioneering work in applied ethics, Causing Death and Saving Lives, has on its cover three lines of verse:

Thou shalt not kill;
But needst not strive/
Officiously to keep alive

These lines are followed by an oversized red question mark. In the pages that follow, Glover devotes a chapter to discussing “the acts and omissions doctrine,” that is, the view that in certain contexts, it is less bad, morally, to omit to do an act than it is to perform a different act, even though the act and the omission have identical consequences. “It will be argued here,” Glover writes, “that we ought to reject the acts and omissions doctrine.”

Glover begins his discussion of the acts and omissions doctrine by acknowledging what can be said in its support. For a start, it is part of our common moral convictions. Glover refers to Philippa Foot’s comment:

Most of us allow people to die of starvation in India and Africa, and there is surely something wrong with us that we do; it would be nonsense, however, to pretend that it is only in law that we make a distinction between allowing people in the underdeveloped countries to die of starvation and sending them poisoned food.

Glover also notes the argument that abandoning the acts and omissions doctrine would be intolerably burdensome, because:

It is arguable that we would have to give money to fight starvation up to the point where we needed it more than those we were helping: perhaps to the point where we would die without it. For not to do so would be to allow more people to die, and this would be like murder.
A third ground for support for the acts and omissions doctrine, Glover says, comes from the way it is presupposed by our moral language, including the distinction we draw between doing our duty, and doing something that is supererogatory.

Nevertheless, Glovers thinks we should reject the doctrine. He argues that we mistakenly believe that there is an important distinction between acts and omissions, because we confuse different kinds of omissions, and wrongly consider as part of the distinction itself, factors that are only contingently associated with it. The doctrine also gains support from our failure to separate the standpoint of the agent from that of the moral critic or judge.

Later in the essay, I return to the question of whether Glover is right to reject the doctrine. For the present, it is enough to see how unflinchingly Glover draws the conclusions that follow from his rejection of the idea that there is an intrinsic moral difference between acts and omissions. After accepting that there are often significant differences in the side-effects of killing and allowing to die, Glover affirms that nevertheless, "deliberately failing to send money to Oxfam, without being able to justify our alternative spending as more important, is in the same league as murder."³

10.2 A GAP IN GLOVER’S MORAL HISTORY OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

I turn now to Glover’s Humanity, a work that bears the ambitious subtitle A Moral History of the Twentieth Century. Perhaps we should not take that subtitle too seriously. (I am only too well aware of the pressure that publishers can put on authors regarding the title or subtitle of a book.) For, as a moral history of the previous century, the book is seriously incomplete. It contains, for example, no account of twentieth-century progress toward equality between men and women, or of the changes in sexual morality, both for heterosexuals and for homosexuals, during that period. The revolution in European thought regarding the treatment and moral status of animals that occurred late in the century also goes unremarked, as does the environmental movement and its attempt to find value in nature and ecological systems. Glover knows, of course, that the book does not really live up to its subtitle. He tells us, in its opening pages, that he has focused Humanity more narrowly in order to avoid the superficiality that would be inevitable if one really were to try to write a moral history of the twentieth century in a single volume.⁴ Instead he offers an account of, and a reflection on, some of the most tragic moral failings of the twentieth century.

Even if we ignore its subtitle, however, there is a conspicuous gap in the chronicles of tragedy that Humanity contains—a gap that is particularly surprising, given its author’s arguments in his earlier book on the acts and
omissions doctrine. For much of the twentieth century, as for the initial years of the twenty-first century, more than a billion people have been living in absolute poverty—a level defined by the World Bank as living on the purchasing power equivalent—usually much less than the actual exchange value—of $1 per day. According to organizations like UNICEF and the Food and Agriculture Organization, each year approximately 18 million people die from causes related to poverty. Some of these people starve to death. Many more, especially children, succumb to malnutrition, and the increased susceptibility to disease that an inadequate diet brings. Diarrhea is a major killer of children. Deaths from diarrhea could be dramatically reduced by providing safe drinking water, or less expensively, by making simple and inexpensive oral rehydration therapy more widely available. Most of the victims of malaria, tuberculosis, and HIV/AIDS are people living in poverty. By the beginning of 2006, AIDS had already killed 25 million people, since 1981, and left behind 14 million orphans. Another 2.9 million died from HIV/AIDS in 2006. Almost 40 million people are estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS now, nearly three-quarters of them in sub-Saharan Africa. In developed countries, AIDS is now a treatable disease and effective health-education programs have greatly reduced its spread. But in developing countries, few people with HIV can afford even the cheaper generic drugs, so many of those infected will die.

Since *Humanity* deals only with events in the twentieth century, let us confine our focus to that century, and specifically to its last decade. This avoids some fuzziness about moral responsibility during the earlier decades of the century, when resources were more limited, and everything, including information, moved more slowly. By 1990, however, economic prosperity in the developed world, coupled with technological improvements in communication and transport, had given the rich nations the capacity to significantly reduce poverty-related deaths. The end of the Cold War made this easier, too, both because the developed nations reaped a substantial “peace dividend” from the reduced need for military expenditure, and because the hostility between communism and the liberal democracies no longer stood in the way of global cooperation in combating poverty. The Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs believes that it is now within our power to end absolute poverty, and thus prevent the overwhelming majority of the deaths that now occur from poverty-related causes. We could do it, he believes, with an additional $124 billion in annual aid—that is less than $0.60 in every $100 that the industrialized nations earn. It is also only $8 billion more than the $116 billion that is spent on alcohol each year in the United States alone.

What happened during the last decade of the twentieth century, when the peace dividend became available? Instead of using the funds to substantially increase foreign aid, most nations, and in particular the United States, sharply reduced the percentage of their gross domestic product that they gave as foreign aid. It seems that, without Cold War politics to spur giving aid for geopolitical purposes, the motivation for giving aid was
not strong enough to maintain the Cold War levels. This was not because aid had been shown to be ineffective. On the contrary, a study prepared for the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development noted the irony of the fact that official aid was "experiencing a steady decline even as conditions are improving for its greater effectiveness."

During those ten years, when the industrialized nations were getting richer, but giving a smaller proportion of their wealth as foreign aid, approximately 180 million people died from poverty-related causes. If Sachs is right, the great majority of these deaths could have been prevented by a relatively modest increase in well-planned aid. But let us assume that Sachs is wrong, and only one-third of these deaths could have been prevented. Even so, we would then have been saving, every year, as many people as died in the entire period of the Holocaust. (If someone objects that the figure of 18 million poverty-related deaths each year is not reliable, and the correct figure is only 10 million, or even, implausibly, just 1 million, I will not argue. Even with the optimistically low figure of only 10 million poverty-related deaths over the entire decade, and the pessimistic claim that we could have saved only a third of these lives, there are still 3.3 million people dead who could have been alive, about twice as many as died in the killing fields of Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, or four times as many as died in the 1994 massacres in Rwanda.)

Granting that Glover has chosen to keep the focus of his book narrow to avoid superficiality, it still seems odd that the failure to prevent such a large number of deaths does not rate a mention in *Humanity*. That puzzle is made more acute by a chapter that does appear in the book, to which I now turn.

10.3 BYSTANDERS TO GENOCIDE

Part VI of *Humanity* describes the crimes committed by the Nazis. One of its chapters, titled "Bystanders," discusses the moral responsibility of those who knew what the Nazis were doing to Jews. A few, like the villagers of Le Chambon, in France, took grave risks to hide Jews who would otherwise have been deported and murdered. Some who gave refuge to Jews paid with their lives for the moral stand they took. A larger number were less heroic, but still brave enough to make small gestures of solidarity, like giving food or cigarettes to "non-Aryans." But the great majority, of course, did nothing. Glover quotes from an account given by Inge Deutschkron, a Jewish girl hiding in Berlin. Deutschkron describes people peering out from behind curtained windows as their Jewish neighbors were taken away. They would whisper to each other in the streets, but they did not act.

Although some people in Berlin may not have known exactly what fate awaited the deported Jews, people who lived near the death camps and concentration camps did not have this excuse. Glover quotes the
inappropriately named Sister Felicitas, who lived near the Austrian concentration camp at Mauthausen. She did protest to the authorities—about the dreadful stench coming from the burning bodies. She describes her father collapsing because "he had forgotten to seal up the windows completely tight." But her concern seems entirely for those who had to breathe in the smell, not for those whose bodies were being burned, or others who might suffer a similar fate.

Glover rightly says that it is difficult for those of us who have never been in such a situation to condemn those who did not protest, for had they protested in any serious way, they would have risked their lives. In a penetrating line he writes: "We all hope we would be like the villagers of Le Chambon, while fearing we might be like the people Inge Deutschkron saw peering out from behind curtained windows." Nevertheless, Glover thinks that as long as we do not try to get too specific, the ethical position is "fairly unproblematic":

When people's lives are at risk from persecution, there is a strong moral obligation to do what is reasonably possible to help. It is not enough to seal up the windows against the smell. The world would be a terrible place if the whole truth about this aspect of us was what Norman Geras has called the "contract of mutual indifference": we leave other people in peril unrescued and accept that others will do the same to us.

The principle becomes more problematic, Glover then tells us, if we attempt to specify how much risk it is reasonable to require someone to take for others. He adds: "Particularly if rescuing a stranger means putting your family at risk, good people may divide about what morality requires."

But what if there is no risk to oneself at all? Glover describes the failures of government leaders and officials in countries not under Nazi rule to assist the Jews, for example by accepting more Jewish refugees. Not surprisingly, Glover finds it "harder to find things to say for the free bystanders who refused to help":

What comes over most strongly is the contribution made to their failure by distance and by lack of moral imagination. People immersed in bureaucratic rules easily forget what is at stake. A code of ethics for officials should include having the imagination to look through the rules to the human reality.

With all this, we can readily agree. But before we condemn the distant officials who did nothing to help those Jews attempting to flee Nazism, should we not consider our attitude to other cases in which people knowingly fail to come to the aid of innocent people who are likely to die without assistance?

10.4 PEERING OUT FROM BEHIND CURTAIN ED WINDOWS

The Nazis systematically murdered approximately 6 million people. That statistic has become so familiar that it no longer shocks, but when we
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read individual stories of one or two of those who lost their lives, and think of such a story multiplied six million times, we may be able to get some inkling of the enormity of suffering that the Holocaust involved. As we saw earlier, it is reasonable to suppose that during the 1990s, at least the same number of people—6 million—died every year from avoidable, poverty-related causes. Even if that estimate is wrong, it is virtually certain that the total number of avoidable poverty-related deaths, over the decade, exceeded the total number of victims of the Nazi Holocaust.

As mentioned earlier, I have focused on the last decade of the twentieth century because Glover's book is a moral history of (at least some aspects of) that century, but, notwithstanding all the promises made at the United Nations Millennium Development Summit, poverty-related deaths did not end with the end of the century. To take just one cause of death as an example: at the current rate of deaths from AIDS, at present, approximately as many people die every two years from AIDS as died at the hands of the Nazi murderers. Poverty—both individual poverty and problems with rural infrastructure—prevents most AIDS victims in developing countries from obtaining the drugs that are available in developed countries, and could save their lives. Some will object that the victims of AIDS are less deserving of our concern than the victims of genocide, because they brought the disease on themselves by their own actions. Some add that they chose to engage in immoral forms of sexual behavior or drug use, while others may content themselves with the claim that many of them knew the risk they were taking, and nevertheless took that risk. For the point I am making, however, I don't need to consider the merits of these claims, because there is a sufficiently large number of HIV/AIDS victims who had no choice at all. Many infants have contracted the disease because their mothers had it. In addition, women now comprise 48 percent of all the people living with HIV/AIDS. Many of these women were powerless to resist sex, or to insist on safe sex, with the men who infected them. So, even if we were to focus only on these "innocent" victims of AIDS, it is still highly probable that over a longer period, say a decade, the number will equal the number who died in the Holocaust.

During the last decade of the twentieth century, when governments in democratic countries cut foreign aid, citizens of those countries had various options by which they could have done something to decrease the toll of poverty-related deaths, and to protest against the failure to save more lives. They could have made the cuts in foreign aid an election issue, and voted out of office governments that reduced, or failed to increase, foreign-aid budgets. They could have written to their elected representatives, or protested in the streets against cuts in foreign aid. And, with the exception of a small proportion of people who were themselves so poor that they had no surplus at all, they could have given some of their own money to nongovernment agencies that, with additional funds, could have done more to reduce poverty, and could have saved more lives.
For citizens of the rich democratic nations, these political activities and personal donations, were completely safe. In contrast to protests on behalf of the Jews from the people Inge Deutschkron saw peering out from behind Berlin’s curtained windows, the antipoverty actions described would not have put any of the protesters or donors in danger of arrest or execution. The most they would have suffered is some loss of disposable income and of leisure time if they actively protested. Most middle-class citizens in the developed world—and, for that matter, the comfortably off middle classes of developing countries in Latin America and Asia—could give away a lot of disposable income before their lives ceased to be comfortable and secure. Yet, most of these people gave little or nothing, and did not protest the cuts in foreign aid.

Given these facts, it would seem that the condemnation Glover applies to the actions of the “free bystanders”—those who did not assist the victims of Nazi persecution to escape the Nazi threat, even though they were living beyond the reach of the Nazi regime and could safely have done so—can be applied equally well to virtually all the citizens of democratic nations during the 1990s, and at present. If it is true that, as Glover says, a world dominated by Norman Geras’s “contract of mutual indifference” would be a terrible place, then it seems that the world we now live in is a terrible place. We have the chance to be at least a little bit like the villagers of Le Chambon—but at a far lesser risk—and we are failing.

10.5 IS STOPPING GENOCIDE A HIGHER PRIORITY THAN STOPPING POVERTY-RELATED DEATHS?

Nicholas Kristof, a New York Times columnist, writes frequently about the continuing genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan, and why it is morally imperative to end it. In a column headed “Why Genocide Matters” he wrote about being asked why he always harps on Darfur. He admits that it is a fair question because the number of people killed in Darfur “is modest in global terms”—he estimates that it is in the range of 200,000–500,000, compared to an annual death toll from malaria of 1 to 3 million. He then goes on to make an argument that would, if it were successful, not only answer the question he was asked, but also explain why the failure to prevent genocide should figure more prominently in a moral history of our times than the failure to prevent deaths from disease or poverty:

So yes, you can make an argument that Darfur is simply one of many tragedies and that it would be more cost-effective to save lives by tackling diarrhea, measles and malaria.

But I don’t buy that argument at all. We have a moral compass within us, and its needle is moved not only by human suffering but also by human evil. That’s what makes genocide special—not just the number of deaths but the government policy behind them. And that in turn is why stopping genocide should be an even higher priority than saving lives from AIDS or malaria.
Even the Holocaust amounted to only 10 percent of World War II casualties and cost far fewer lives than the AIDS epidemic. But the Holocaust evokes special revulsion because it wasn’t just tragic but also monstrous, and that’s why we read Anne Frank and Elie Wiesel. Teenage girls still die all the time and little boys still starve and lose their parents—but when this arises from genocide, the horror resonates with all humans. Or so it should. 14

Kristof then goes on to lament that in the case of Darfur, the genocide there “has aroused mostly yawns around the globe.”

In this passage, Kristof bases his claim that we should give priority to stopping genocide, rather than, say, reducing the number of deaths caused by malaria, on how we feel about genocide, the special way in which it moves our moral compass. In discussing the acts and omissions doctrine in *Causing Death and Saving Lives*, Glover considered something like this argument when he acknowledged that the resentment we feel against someone who does not care enough about others to do what is necessary to keep them alive, is nowhere near as strong as the resentment we feel against someone who wants people to die. 15 The fact that people do feel this differential resentment is, he suggested, a side effect that we should take into account, in weighing up the consequences of allowing to die, as compared with killing. But in Glover’s view, the existence of this feeling of much greater resentment against those who actively kill, as compared to those who allow to die, does not go any way toward justifying the view that it is, *in itself*, worse to kill than to allow to die. Glover, in other words, doesn’t take the feelings as a pointer to what is morally right. Kristof, in contrast, does seem to think that our “moral compass” provides some accurate guidance as to what we ought to do.

I shall consider this argument about the accuracy of our moral compass, or our feelings of resentment, as a guide to action. But before I do, I shall just note that reliance on the moral compass creates a problem for Kristof with regard to Darfur, because he admits that, in that particular case, the compass isn’t working as he thinks it should. This is awkward for him. He wants to assert that we ought to give priority to stopping the genocide in Darfur because genocide evokes such horror in us, but he also laments that most people greet news of the Darfur genocide with yawns. That consideration would point toward selective discrimination in regard to which genocides we try to stop, with Darfur rating at the bottom. Presumably genocide directed against people more like us—white, educated, living in an industrialized nation—would evoke more horror and therefore ought to receive priority. No regular reader of Kristof’s columns can believe that this is the conclusion he would wish to draw.

Putting the specific problem of our response to the genocide in Darfur aside, let us grant that when we hear of, or think about, genocide, we are moved by a strong sense of great evil, and perhaps other feelings of horror, outrage, and resentment against the perpetrators, desire for retribution and so on. And let us also grant that when we hear of, or think about,
people dying from malaria who could have been saved by timely donations from affluent people, we do not have such feelings, or do not have them to nearly as strong a degree. I take it that this is what Kristof means by our "moral compass" but I will avoid that term, since it presupposes that there is some magnetic north of morality, that is, something objective by which the compass is moved. Instead, I will refer to the attitudes that Kristof considers a compass as "moral intuitions." Following Jonathan Haidt, I use that term to refer to a system of rapid responses or reactions to particular situations. These rapid responses are not the outcome of reasoning processes and we do not have conscious control over them.16

Translated into this terminology, the judgments delivered by Kristof's "moral compass" fit well with a growing body of research in evolutionary psychology about our moral intuitions, including our intuitions of reciprocity and fairness. For example, we know that both humans and nonhuman primates reject offers that they consider unfair, even though this costs them something they would otherwise want. And we know that people will incur some cost, without any prospect of recouping the cost, in order to punish people who have acted unfairly. Consider, for example, the results of the psychology experiment known as the "ultimatum game," in which two players interact, anonymously and only once, so that reciprocity is irrelevant. The players are told that one of them—the proposer—will be given a sum of money, say $10, and must divide it with the second player—the responder—but can offer as much or as little as she wishes. If the responder rejects the offer, neither player will get anything, but if the responder accepts the offer, he will keep what was offered, and the proposer will keep the remainder. According to standard self-interest theory, the proposer should offer the smallest possible amount and the responder should nevertheless accept it, because after all, even a small amount is better than nothing at all. But in fact, in many different cultures, most proposers offer an equal split of the money, and if the proposer does offer less than 20 percent, the responder often rejects it. This suggests that many people, even when interacting with a complete stranger with whom they will never interact again, prefer to punish unfairness than to get some money.17 Even monkeys reject a reward for a task if they see another monkey getting a better reward for performing the same task.18 From this research, plausible accounts have emerged of how developing such a set of moral intuitions may have enhanced the reproductive fitness of those who had them.

It is, however, one thing to say that we evolved to have certain moral intuitions, and another to say that these intuitions are right, or should be followed. To equate the two commits the fallacy, noticed so long ago by David Hume, of deducing an "ought" from an "is," or in other words, of drawing value judgments out of purely factual statements.

Even if no logical fallacy were involved in moving from facts about our intuitions to judgments about what is right, we would need to be wary about assuming that the intuitions that enhanced our fitness over most
of our evolutionary history are still the ones we should act upon today. As Joshua Greene has suggested, physical violence from another human being has been possible throughout our evolutionary history, and we have developed a strong moral intuition against it. Hence, most people say it would be wrong to push a heavy person in front of a runaway trolley, thus stopping the trolley and saving the lives of five people in a tunnel further down the track. On the other hand, since switches and train tracks are relatively recent inventions, we have no evolved negative response to throwing a switch that will divert the same trolley onto a sidetrack, saving the five people in the tunnel, but killing one who is working on the side track. So, most people say that would not be wrong. Yet, the outcomes are the same in both cases—one person dies but five are saved—and it is hard to find good reasons for differentiating between the two judgments.

Perhaps our differing intuitions about genocide and the prevention of poverty-related deaths derive from this difference. Our strong visceral opposition to genocide draws on our negative responses to physical violence and killing, which in genocide happens on a large scale and in ways that make the innocence of the victims obvious. For most of our evolutionary history, however, we have not been able to do much to help others who are needy, but not nearby. We have often had difficulty in meeting our own needs, and those of our extended family, for food. Hence, although we do have a positive response to helping our kin and those immediately in front of us, we have not evolved any intuitive response to failing to help strangers who are far away. Now, however, we have the means to drastically reduce poverty anywhere in the world, and thereby to save millions of lives every year. In these changed circumstances, why should we rely upon our intuition that stopping genocide is a higher priority than saving a much larger number of people who will otherwise die from preventable diseases?

Putting aside intuitions that may mislead us, then, is there a reason to think that it is worse to do nothing about genocide than to do nothing about preventing a death by disease? Let us assume that, as Kristof accepts, we could save more lives by targeting our sizable, but still limited, resources against disease than we could by using them to stop genocide. Let us also assume that those who are killed in the genocide do not suffer any more than those who die from the disease. Whether this assumption holds in the real world will, of course, depend upon the circumstances. Many of the victims of the Nazi Holocaust suffered unspeakably. In addition to the fear about what was going to happen to them, they had to endure long journeys in crowded cattle trucks, in freezing cold, or stifling heat. Others had their children taken away from them, or killed before their eyes. Some were imprisoned in inhuman concentration camps, on semi-starvation rations, with endemic diseases, and ever-present threat of brutal beatings if they did not work hard enough. Such factors do, of course, provide additional reasons for stopping genocide. But poverty-related diseases may also cause terrible suffering, and parents living in desperate
poverty may also see their children die in front of them, knowing that if only they had money, they could get treatment that would save their children's lives. Even if this suffering is generally less than that of the victims of genocides, our interest here is in whether stopping genocide as such should have higher priority than stopping deaths from poverty-related causes, and so we should put aside possible differences in the amount of suffering that accompanies the deaths in particular circumstances.

One argument for giving priority to stopping genocide might be that those committing genocide are doing something morally very wrong. When we stop them, therefore, we not only save the lives of innocents, but we also stop a moral evil. When we prevent deaths from poverty-related diseases, we "only" save the lives of innocents. Hence, we have an extra reason to stop the deaths from genocide that we do not have in the case of preventing deaths by disease.

Should we give independent weight to stopping a moral evil, beyond the harm that has been prevented by stopping the evil? Suppose that two people are suffering great pain by having parts of their body burned. One of them is the victim of a torturer, while the other is trapped in a building that is on fire. Should we give higher priority to saving the one who is being tortured? We might answer affirmatively because we have in mind that if we don't stop the torturer, he will move on to other victims. Or we might be influenced by the thought that the torturer may enjoy the plight of his victim, because many people think that it is bad that anyone should get pleasure from torture. So, let us assume that although the torturer has set in motion machinery that will, unless we intervene, continue to inflict pain on the victim, he then committed suicide, and so can neither torture anyone else, nor enjoy his victim's suffering. Then I think our priority should be to save the victim who is suffering more. As I have argued elsewhere, I know of no better way of deciding what we ought to do than to put ourselves in the position of all those affected by the actions open to us and do what we would prefer if we had to live all their lives. In the situation we are not considering, if the victims could choose the decision procedure that would lead to one of them being rescued, and they did not know which one of them would be suffering more, nor which of them would be suffering because of an accident, and which would be suffering because of the torturer, it would be in their interests to choose that the one who is suffering more should be the first one to be rescued.

The same argument applies when lives are at stake, rather than suffering. Suppose that Sherlock Holmes has deduced that a cunning murderer plans to kill his next victim by rolling a boulder down a hill onto the victim, who is picnicking, all alone, in an alpine meadow. The plan will succeed, unless Holmes warns the intended victim, but to do so he must first run a short distance toward the victim in order to be in earshot. He is about to set off when he sees that a mountain goat has dislodged a different boulder that is beginning to roll down the opposite side of the ridge, where it will kill two unsuspecting picnickers. Holmes can save them if he
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runs a short distance down that side of the ridge to warn them. If he first saves the intended victim of the murderer, he will not have time to save the two picnickers who are in the path of the boulder dislodged by the goat. I think that Holmes should save the two victims, not just one. The fact that their deaths would be accidental and the other death would be intended is not of sufficient weight—if, indeed, it is of any weight at all—to overcome the difference in the number of lives saved. (We can assume that Holmes has alerted the local police to the presence of the murderer, and that despite their usual limited competence, they will apprehend him and he will be convicted of several other murders and locked away for life, whether or not his latest attempt succeeds.21)

Against this view, one might attempt to employ an argument once put forward by Elizabeth Anscombe.22 Anscombe argued that, if I have a choice between rowing my boat so as to save one person from drowning, or rowing it in a different direction to save a group of people, I have no obligation to save the group. If I save just the one, none of the others can make any justified accusation against me. I may have had an obligation to save someone, but I had no obligation to save any particular person. No one has been wronged. In Causing Death and Saving Lives, Glover has no difficulty in showing that this view leads to paradoxes, and should be rejected in favor of what he calls a maximizing policy: “other things being equal, we ought always to prefer to save a larger to a smaller number of people.”23 This is surely correct. It is question begging to assume, as Anscombe does, that the rights and wrongs of all actions depend on whether the action gives an individual a ground for complaint. Instead, we can again look at it as a choice under conditions of uncertainty. If three people know that they will need rescuing under the circumstances described by Anscombe, and know that they have an equal chance of being any of the people needing to be rescued, but do not know whether they will be the isolated individual or a member of the larger group, it would be rational for them to choose that the rescuer go to the larger group. For if the rescuer saves the isolated individual, they have only a one-in-three chance of being saved, whereas if the rescuer goes to the larger group, their chance of rescue is twice as high.

So the numbers do count, and stopping moral evil should not be allowed to outweigh the good of saving as many lives as possible. But there is a different distinction between genocide and poverty-related deaths that may also lead people to think it more important to stop genocide. When genocides succeed, they extinguish an entire people, along with their distinctive culture and way of life. This is an additional tragedy, on top of the tragedy of the individual lives lost, and arguably gives greater urgency to the case for preventing genocide.24 But this consideration does not seem to weigh heavily with most of us. If it did, then the Armenian genocides and the Nazi Holocaust would be much worse than Stalin’s mass purges, or the massacres committed by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. In thinking
about these events, the cruel deaths of so many individuals outweigh the additional loss of the people and their culture. Conversely, when a people and their culture disappear because of their own choices—as when they marry into a larger community and their language falls into disuse—we may regret the loss, but we do not think of it in anything like the same moral terms as would have been the case if the people had been massacred. This suggests that if, given our available resources, we could save the lives of many more victims of poverty than we could save, if instead we attempted to save the lives of victims of genocide, we should save the victims of poverty.

There may be a good consequentialist reason for giving priority to saving lives and preventing suffering that occur as a result of genocide, rather than as a result of natural causes. Just as we resent unfairness and are prepared to punish it at some cost to ourselves, so perhaps those who know that they are the victims of injustice suffer more than those who know they have only natural causes to blame for their suffering. This claim is plausible, but one can ask how much more the victims of injustice suffer, and whether, for example, it is enough to justify giving priority to ending the genocide in Darfur, with its 200,000–500,000 victims, rather than reducing the annual 1 to 3 million deaths caused by malaria. This seems doubtful. To the extent that victims of injustice do suffer more, this will be taken into account by a formulation that says that we should give priority to preventing the greatest amount of suffering. Then we need to add a warning that the degree of suffering may depend, not only on the physical harm done, but also on what caused it.

In *Causing Death and Saving Lives*, Glover considers a different reason for giving priority to stopping massacres rather than preventing harmful omissions. It is, he imagines someone arguing, more important to condemn people who show the kind of character that leads them to commit violent, hostile acts, than to discourage people whose omissions show a lack of concern or imagination. Therefore, blaming people for their acts rather than their omissions will have good consequences. But this is, Glover says, “not obviously true” because:

> It is arguable that indifference plays as large a part in causing the world’s misery as positive hostility. The existence of wars, poverty and many of the other things that destroy or stunt people’s lives may be as dependent on widespread unconcern as on any positively bad motives. It may well be because of tacit acceptance of the acts and omissions doctrine that we acquiesce in the worst evils in the world.

This is a plausible claim. But it adds to the puzzle of why the only omissions Glover discusses in *Humanity* are the inadequacies of the bystanders to the Holocaust, while the “widespread unconcern” of most of the citizens of the affluent world about the avoidable poverty-related deaths of tens of millions of people are themselves omitted from the book. Other things being equal, I can see no adequate grounds for giving a higher priority to
stopping genocide than to stopping poverty-related deaths. Recognizing the serious nature of our failure to aid those dying from poverty-related causes, by giving the topic at least one chapter in *Humanity*, would have been a good way of making this point, and would not have run the risk of superficiality.

There is also one speculative, but plausible, consideration that points in the opposite direction, for giving priority to preventing harmful omissions rather than to preventing massacres. It is reasonable to suppose that acts of helping strangers are more under our conscious control than are genocidal acts. This view is supported by much of the historical material about genocide that Glover so ably presents in *Humanity*. Genocidal behavior may be the result of specific historical circumstances in which political leaders are able to tap into strong emotional responses deep in human nature. In these particular, but fortunately rare circumstances, neither the power of example, nor reminders of high moral standards, may have any influence. On the other hand, good examples and high moral standards may be more likely to have an effect in the more normal conditions in which people help strangers in need. If this is right, then encouraging people to help strangers escape poverty may be more effective than trying to stop genocide.

10.6 CONCLUSION

Although *Humanity* does not discuss our moral failure to take the steps needed for a drastic reduction in global poverty, Glover's own work offers two distinct lines of thought that should lead us to take this failure very seriously. One is his critique of the acts and omissions doctrine in *Causing Death and Saving Lives* and the other is his discussion of the moral culpability of bystanders to the Holocaust. The former leads us to review again the way in which we sharply distinguish letting someone die, when we could save them, from killing that person. The other leads us to ask what can justify our condemnation of those who fail to act to save the victims of genocide, when we ourselves are failing to save an even larger number of victims of poverty.

As I have argued elsewhere, whether or not we consider allowing to die as morally equivalent to killing, we cannot justify our inaction when we could be helping those living in desperate poverty. What then should we do? In *Causing Death and Saving Lives*, Glover says that living up to the morality that is entailed by his own rejection of the acts and omissions doctrine is "a very unattractive prospect: it is the prospect of a huge reduction in income and the loss of a lot of our spare time." But, he continues, if we assume that the acts and omissions doctrine cannot be saved, then the only other approach is to accept "a huge discrepancy between professed beliefs and actual conduct". About this Glover candidly remarks: "This is not very admirable, either."
Indeed, it is not. But the choice is not either/or. We can give substantial amounts of money to organizations working to aid those who are desperately poor (and we can give some of our time to the same cause), without giving so much that we have no money or leisure left for indulging in our own desires. We might then be doing more to prevent death from poverty-related causes, in proportion to our income and our spare time, than 99 percent, or perhaps 99.9 percent, of those living in the rich nations. Even at that level, we will still be failing to do things that could save lives, without putting our own lives in danger. So, judged by the demanding standards that confront us when we reject the acts and omissions doctrine, we will still not be doing enough. Our behavior will be less admirable than that of the villagers of Le Chambon. Nevertheless, in one sense what we are doing will be admirable. We will be doing far more than most people, and we will be raising the standard of what morality requires in regard to the poor. This is a reason for not being too hard on ourselves. Moreover, a life lived in this way is not lacking in attractions. Making a substantial contribution toward what is, by any reasonable standards, a worthwhile goal, can give meaning and fulfillment to our lives.

Postscript

I was a graduate student at Oxford from 1969–71. In 1970, I attended Glover’s lectures on Free Will, Determinism, and Moral Responsibility. They were among the best lectures I attended, laying out the issues clearly and full of interesting examples. The most stimulating classes I attended during my time at Oxford, however, were seminars given by Derek Parfit, Jonathan Glover, and Jim Griffin on what we would now call applied ethics, although that term was not then in use. Each week, one of them would give a talk that initiated a lively discussion. Though it was difficult for either Jonathan or Jim—or anyone else, for that matter—to match Derek’s originality and sheer philosophical brilliance, Glover’s contributions always raised intriguing philosophical issues in serious practical problems. Some of them later appeared in *Causing Death and Saving Lives*. His work blazed a trail that I was to follow into applied ethics.

Indirectly, Glover was responsible for changing my life in a more fundamental way. After one of his lectures on moral responsibility in 1970, I fell into conversation with Richard Keshen, who was attending the same series of lectures and had asked a question I found interesting. He suggested we continue the conversation over lunch at his college, Balliol. That day there was a choice between spaghetti with some kind of reddish-brown sauce over it, or a salad plate. Richard asked if the sauce had meat in it, and when told that it did, took the salad plate. I took the spaghetti, and when our discussion of free will and determinism had run its course, I asked Richard why he avoided meat. I had met very few vegetarians up to that time, and those I had met thought meat was bad for their health, had religious grounds for avoiding it, or were pacifists, holding that killing
is always wrong. I was neither religious nor a pacifist, and I didn’t believe meat, in moderate quantities, was unhealthy. Richard’s answer was more challenging. He told me that he did not think we had a right to treat animals in the way that the animals that had become the meat I was eating were treated. That made me ask about how the animals were treated, and started me thinking about how we ought to treat animals. The result was that I soon became a vegetarian myself, and a few years later, wrote Animal Liberation, which some have credited with helping to start the modern animal movement.

Notes

11. Page 393.
12. I wrote Pushing Time Away: My Grandfather and the Tragedy of Jewish Vienna (Ecco, New York, 2003) in order to, at least in part, remember the life of one of those victims.
17. There is a substantial literature on the ultimatum game. For a useful discussion, see Martin Nowak, Karen Page, and Karl Sigmund, “Fairness versus reason in the ultimatum game.” Science, September 8, 2000, 289(5485), pp. 1773–75.


21. This example derives from a similar one that Jeff McMahan outlined in conversation.


24. I am grateful to Jeff McMahan for pointing this out to me.

25. I owe this suggestion to Tony Coady.


27. I owe this point to Agata Sagan.


29. For comments on earlier drafts, I am grateful to the editors, Agata Sagan, Tony Coady, and participants in seminars at the Center for Human Values, Princeton University, the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics at the University of Melbourne, and the University of Oxford.