RESEARCH NOTE

On the duty to withhold global aid now to save more lives in the future

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The world is riddled with human suffering, poverty, and destitution. In the face of this moral tragedy, the least that the global wealthy can do is try to support aid programs aimed at relieving the plight of the very poor. Many political leaders, pop stars, and religious personalities have realized this, and routinely urge us to be more sensitive to the conditions of the distant needy. Giving aid thus seems to be one of the most important moral imperatives of our time.

Taking seriously the moral imperative of giving aid implies directing one’s resources where they are likely to be most effective. For instance, if a donation of a hundred dollars could save one child in Bangladesh, but ten in Africa, all else equal, it seems that we ought to send the money to Africa. If our aim is to save people’s lives, we should do so in the most cost-effective way. Why save one when, all other things being equal, we could save ten?

The principle of development (or aid)-effectiveness is a widely adopted one in both academic discussion and policy making. However, following the familiar and seemingly unproblematic logic behind this principle, in conjunction with empirically plausible premises, we quickly reach an unpalatable conclusion, namely that we have a duty to refrain from giving aid at present, if we can save more lives in the future ‘with the money we are now contemplating giving away’.

A rigorous argument in support of this disturbing duty has been recently articulated by the philosopher Dan Moller. In addition to its compatibility with the popular logic of aid-effectiveness, Moller suggests that this duty is consistent with consequentialist and deontological moral outlooks alike. In conjunction with a few plausible empirical assumptions, the fairly uncontroversial premise that present lives and future lives are equally valuable leads to a very controversial duty (D) to let the
present generation starve, in order to save more lives in the future. The argument in support of this conclusion goes as follows:

P1. Future lives count just as much as present lives; preventing future deaths is just as important as preventing present-time deaths.4
P2. There will continue to be at-risk people in developing countries whose lives we could save by contributing to aid organizations in the foreseeable future.
P3. The real cost of providing life-saving aid will decrease over time.
P4. There are methods of increasing our wealth (in real terms) over time.
P5. It would often benefit us to delay providing aid.5

D. We have a duty to let people starve for now, in order to save more lives in the future.

When P1 and P2 are combined with P3 or P4, under either consequentialist or deontological background assumptions, says Moller, ‘we arrive at a case for delaying giving aid’.6 If either P3 or P4 is (or both are) true, then there are genuine opportunity costs in aiding now, costs that can be cashed out in terms of lives not saved. A hundred dollars might save two people today, but four tomorrow.7

This conclusion has very far-reaching implications. For instance, if there are principled reasons for delaying giving aid, then we can no longer assume that it is appropriate to criticize the wealthy of the world for their inaction with respect to world poverty. Politicians, religious leaders and pop stars may have simply urged us to do the wrong thing. Instead of devoting a substantial portion of our income to development aid, we ought to neglect the plight of the poor at least for now, if doing so enables us to save more lives in the future.

This moral imperative undoubtedly strikes most as implausible. Yet it generates an interesting dilemma precisely because it seems to follow from widely held principles, such as aid-effectiveness and the equal value of human life. Does this mean that consistency in our convictions speaks in favor of endorsing a duty to delay giving aid? In this note, I show that, contrary to first appearances, a duty to delay giving aid does not stand up to scrutiny, regardless of whether we take a consequentialist or a deontological perspective. Ignoring others’ suffering at present, while keeping a clear conscience—*insofar as their suffering would be ignored for moral reasons*—is simply not an option. My argument is structured as follows.

In the next section, I argue that, if we take consequentialist requirements seriously, P2—“There will continue to be at-risk people in developing countries”—turns out to be false, hence the argument is *unsound* (no matter whether further assumptions P3–P5 are true). In the following section, I suggest that, if we take deontological requirements seriously, D cannot follow from premises P1–P5, hence the argument is *invalid*. Letting people starve for now in order to save more later is at most permissible, but certainly not obligatory on a deontological view. In short, I conclude that neither consequentialists nor deontologists have good reasons to endorse D.
DOES A CONSEQUENTIALIST HAVE A DUTY TO LET PEOPLE STARVE—FOR NOW?

If assumptions P2–P5 are correct, then it seems that a consequentialist—someone who thinks that the rightness or wrongness of one’s actions is to be judged solely on the basis of their consequences—would indeed have a duty to delay charitable donations. Why act now, if I can prevent more harm later at the same cost to myself? In this section, I suggest that the antecedent of this conditional cannot be satisfied. In particular, I offer three arguments showing that, if we take consequentialist duties to prevent human suffering seriously, assumption P2, that there will continue to be as many, if not more, needy people in the future, loses plausibility. These are (1) the argument from full compliance, (2) the argument from partial compliance, and (3) the argument from institutional reform.

Before examining these arguments, it should be noted that P1—the claim that present and future lives are of equal moral importance—is compatible with both of the following versions of consequentialism, inspired by Peter Singer’s work.

Strong consequentialism: ‘If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening [e.g., a person’s death], without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it’.8

Weak consequentialism: If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without incurring too high a cost to ourselves, we ought, morally, to do it.9

While strong consequentialism implicitly relies on the further assumption that a person’s own life is as valuable as those of others (present and future), weak consequentialism makes room for an agent-centered prerogative.10 On a weak consequentialist view, we have a duty to prevent bad things from happening to others, but we are not morally bound to do so by bringing ourselves to the level of marginal utility.11 For instance, giving up a few restaurant meals, a new pair of shoes, or an exotic holiday in order to save a few children’s lives cannot plausibly count as excessively costly. However, significantly reducing the quality of one’s life—for instance by giving up restaurant meals, new shoes, and holidays altogether—would presumably be too heavy a burden to bear. To make my argument against the plausibility of assumption P2 as strong as possible, I only focus on weak consequentialism. If even weak consequentialism undermines P2, then, a fortiori, strong consequentialism does so too.

The argument from full compliance

Presumably, if everyone took weak consequentialism seriously—i.e. if its core principle were fully complied with—the number of people in developing countries in need of our aid would be dramatically reduced in the near future. Considering (1) how many people in the world currently lead comfortable and sheltered lives and (2) how much they could give away without incurring excessive costs, general conformity with weak consequentialist duties would certainly lead to a massive shrinking in the
number of those whose lives are threatened by poverty and destitution. An exact calculation of how much each of us would have to give to fulfill her duties of aid is well beyond the scope of this paper. All I am suggesting is that, no matter what the sum turns out to be, this would lead to an unprecedented decline in world poverty.\textsuperscript{12}

Under conditions of \textit{full compliance}, then, assumption P2 that ‘[t]here will continue to be at-risk people in developing countries whose lives we could save by contributing to aid organizations in the foreseeable future’ becomes questionable.\textsuperscript{13} And if we have reason to believe that donating resources now will significantly reduce the number of needy people in the future, then we no longer have any reason to affirm D along the lines suggested. For recall that this duty only makes sense on the assumption that delaying aid is a way of helping more people in the future. But if by aiding now we can ensure that demand for aid will diminish later, D simply cannot get off the ground. Of course, one could envisage the possibility that the costs of not saving now ‘might still be outweighed by the benefits of delaying’,\textsuperscript{14} however, such a possibility appears to be so empirically remote—given (1) how many people in the world lead comfortable and sheltered lives and (2) how much they could give away without incurring excessive costs—that it is hardly worth pursuing.

\section*{The argument from partial compliance}

The line of reasoning I have just presented only works assuming full compliance. Unfortunately, this assumption cannot be taken for granted. Only a small minority of the world’s privileged inhabitants are likely to take their obligations to prevent bad things from happening seriously, even if these are not too demanding. Short of a complete revolution in people’s attitudes towards the suffering of distant strangers inducing widespread compliance with aid obligations, P2 is indeed empirically plausible. Would this be sufficient to support a (contingent) duty to let some people starve now in order to save greater numbers in the future? I believe not.

There is no doubt that a dose of realism is a good thing in policy-making. When proposing particular policies, we need to make sure that they are sufficiently in line with people’s motivational dispositions, otherwise they are unlikely to be acted upon.\textsuperscript{15} For instance, it may be that even though our best moral theory demands that we donate 50\% of our income to development aid, this would be a hopeless policy proposal to advance in any country. The proposal would be perceived as too demanding, and rejected outright by most wealthy citizens. By contrast, an invitation to donate 10\% of one’s income might be, all things considered, more effective because likelier to be acted upon, even though it is well below what morality itself demands.

These are valid considerations at the level of policy-making, but not at that of moral theorizing as such. The fact that people fail to discharge their duties of aid at present, thus contributing to future suffering and destitution, is no reason to deny their duties to aid ‘here and now’. If the existence of future suffering and destitution were independent of the current generation’s moral failures, things would be different. A duty to delay giving aid would be a genuine duty to maximize one’s positive impact.
on reducing world poverty. In other words, it would be the best way of acting on our duty to aid in the first place. But this is not the case we are discussing.

In the latter case, accepting a duty to delay giving aid would give rise to morally unacceptable consequences. If empirical assumption P2—that there will continue to be many human beings whose lives are at risk due to poverty and destitution—holds only because most people fail to discharge their duties at present, then it seems that a duty to delay giving aid to save more lives in the future would both (1) offer an easy justification for existing inaction and (2) further contribute to the conditions that warrant delaying aid in the first place. The more people fail to give aid now, the more people will need aid in the future, the more we have reason to act as D recommends. But there is surely something perverse in this line of reasoning, since it implies that we ought to delay aid indefinitely. The less we help now, the more we will be able to help in the future. The less we help in the near future, the more we will be able to help in the distant future, and so forth. D turns out to be an unconditional license for inaction, which is absurd.16

The argument from institutional reform

At this point, a proponent of D might object that I have failed to consider scenarios in which not giving aid now has good, rather than bad, consequences for persons’ well-being. For instance, it might be argued that ‘the deaths of vulnerable members of a society might actually have a positive effect on future generations because of attendant changes in birth-rate, a relieving of the welfare system, and so on’.17 How to respond to this remark? Instead of undermining my previous arguments, this observation points to a third, even more direct reason why assumption P2 is misleading; namely, its implicit reliance on the thought that aid only involves monetary or resource transfers.

Assumptions P1–P5 deliver duty D only if we think that sending money to charities for them to provide the needy with basic material goods is the only way in which aid can or should be discharged. This thought is misleading.18 The question to be asked is not simply: What do the needy need? But, most importantly: Why do they lack access to vital resources? Providing such resources directly may cure the symptoms of poverty but not its causes. That is, it fails to align with the demands of aid-effectiveness that motivate D in the first place.

As argued by Amartya Sen, famines and like humanitarian disasters may depend more on the absence of effective institutions, than on the lack of natural resources.19 This is the case not only at the domestic level, but also at the international one. Malfunctioning or corrupt global institutions have a profound impact on the well-being of many. For instance, World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations and agreements often end up unfairly promoting the interests of developed countries, to the detriment of developing ones.20 Or else, as suggested by Thomas Pogge and others, widely accepted international rules, such as the International Borrowing and Resource Privileges, incentivize corrupt elites to seize power in resource-rich but
politically unstable countries. According to these rules, whoever has effective control over a country’s territory and people can freely borrow and lend resources in the country’s name, using them as if they were one’s private property. Paradoxically, through such dynamics, the populations of resource-rich countries end up being worse off than those of resource-poor nations.21

Given the evidence in support of the claim that institutions are the main determinants of a people’s prosperity, the assumption that aid should consist mainly, or primarily, in transfer of money or resources (such as food) is unwarranted. There is in fact little point in continuing to send food supplies to a country that fails to implement policies designed to control its population growth. This type of aid would clearly be ineffective. If a country is constantly overpopulated, the fact that its inhabitants are poor and destitute should come as little surprise. However, if resources were invested in institution-building, or to subsidize campaigns to raise awareness about the problem of overpopulation, action now would significantly reduce the number of those who would be at risk of dying from poverty and malnutrition in the future.22 Letting people die by delaying giving aid is not going to help solve the fundamental institutional deficiencies that generate poverty in the first place. Saving people now by promoting institutional reform and thereby avoiding poverty in the future seems to be a far more effective course of action than letting people die today in order to save more in the future.

So far I have offered three arguments showing why, on a weak (and, a fortiori, on a strong) consequentialist view, assumption P2 is questionable, and therefore the argument for a duty to let some people starve now in order to save more in the future is unsound. But what about a deontological view?

**DOES A DEONTOLOGIST HAVE A DUTY TO LET PEOPLE STARVE—FOR NOW?**

As anticipated, it has been argued that D should command acceptance from deontologists as well. The idea is that, if one has a duty to help those in need, one presumably should do so as effectively as possible. Given assumptions P2–P5, it would seem that the most effective way to help the needy—to prevent people from starving—is to concentrate on the future rather than on the present.23 Is this an argument a deontologist should accept? Not quite. A deontologist could easily resist this conclusion if she were able to point to ‘some special relationship’ in which we stand with respect to existing strangers but which does not necessarily apply to future ones.24 As I shall argue, these special relationships in fact exist. In particular, I shall put forward the following two claims (1) if we have no special relations to the members of the present generation, on a deontological view we are at most permitted, but certainly not obligated, to ‘let people starve for now’ if this would help save more in the future; and (2) in fact, we do have special relations to the present generation that exclude even the permissibility of D.
Permissibility versus obligation

Let me start by noticing that, from a deontological perspective, even if we did not stand in any special relations to those who belong to our generation, we would not stand in any special relation to those who will belong to future generations either. This means that a deontological view cannot support a duty to let the present poor starve in order to save more poor people in the future; the priority D gives to the imperative of ‘saving the greater number’ violates the fundamental deontological concern with the irreducible value of each person’s life. Coupled with genuine deontological premises, the argument for D thus turns out to be invalid. Establishing a duty to help future persons would be equal to arbitrarily discriminating against their needy ancestors. The fact that they have been born at one particular point in time is certainly arbitrary from a moral point of view—it is not their fault—and condemning them to death just because of this random fact seems morally unacceptable. This is not to say that it would be impermissible for a person to decide to delay one’s contribution to alleviating world poverty, invest one’s money, and then save more lives at time \( t' \) than one would have saved at time \( t \) (prior to \( t' \)). This course of action may be permissible—it may be up to each individual to decide how best to help those in need—but cannot plausibly be regarded as mandatory from within a deontological perspective.\(^{25}\)

Special relations

I have argued that, in general, on a deontological view, we are at most permitted rather than obligated to ‘let people starve for now’. This consideration applies under the assumption that we do not stand in any particular relation toward the putative recipients of our aid—that is, it applies when our relations to the present generation are no different from our relations to future ones. But can we plausibly claim that the relatively privileged today stand in no special relations to the existing poor? I believe not. The privileged segment of the world’s population—predominantly concentrated in the West—cannot regard world poverty as merely the result of bad luck or bad judgment on the part of the poor and their political leaders. As Pogge argues, a history of depredation (think of colonialism) and unfair international agreements (think of the WTO) arguably warrants the claim that the existing rich are partly responsible for the plight of the existing poor. Their agency is implicated in the plight of the existing poor in a way that arguably makes their moral position toward them relevantly different from their moral position vis-a-vis the future poor.\(^{26}\)

If this is the case, our relation to the poverty of some of our contemporaries is special indeed: we have contributed to it, through past and present injustice. Under these circumstances, far from being permitted (let alone required) to let people starve for now, we would be under a stringent obligation to relieve the poor from their plight. It is certainly true that ‘a decent person [Jim] could refuse to save a man drowning before his eyes in order to go and save two drowning people down the road’.\(^{27}\) However, things would be different if Jim had pushed the first man into the
In that case, on a deontological view, Jim would be primarily responsible for saving that man. Similarly, if the plausible claim that the wealthy of the world are partly responsible for the plight of the existing poor is correct, then they do have a particularly stringent duty to relieve them from their sufferings. The duty to save the poor of the future will have to fall on somebody else—i.e. our wealthy (future) counterparts.

CONCLUSION

In this short note, I have attempted to reject the suggestion that we may be under a duty to ‘let people starve for now’ in order to save more in the future. I have argued that, contrary to what has been recently suggested by Dan Moller, this duty cannot be justified from within either a consequentialist or a deontological ethical perspective. In particular, I have challenged the plausibility of assumption P2 in the line of consequentialist reasoning that leads to establish such a duty; and shown how, for a deontologist, letting people starve for now can be at most permissible, but is in fact likely to be impermissible under existing empirical circumstances.

That said, I am aware of the limits of this short piece. First, I have only focused on what I regard as the key assumption in support of D (i.e. P2) and omitted discussing assumptions P3–P5. Moreover, I have no illusion to have conclusively demonstrated that under no circumstances can we be required to let some die in order to save more in the future. However, I do hope to have shown that such circumstances are much less likely to be actualized than my target argument suggests.

Faced with the disappointingly low contribution on the part of the world’s rich to help the world’s poor, Moller suggests that ‘perhaps appeals not to give now, but rather to invest in appreciating assets which are willed to aid would be more successful’. I must confess that I am far less optimistic. A moral argument against aiding the poor now is likely to legitimize the conduct of the many who fail to discharge their duties of aid, providing them with a very good excuse to procrastinate action indefinitely. This is why it is of paramount importance to show that it is a bad idea to ‘let people starve, for now, to save more in the future’.

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NOTES

1. See, e.g., the Oxfam page on aid-effectiveness, http://www.oxfam.org/en/about/issues/aid-effectiveness; See also the UNDP report on development-effectiveness, http://www.undp.org/evaluation/documents/final_development_effectiveness.pdf. All links in the article were last accessed on May, 25, 2011.

2. Dan Moller, ‘Should We Let People Starve—For Now?’, Analysis 66 (2006): 240–7, 243.
3. Ibid., 244. Moller’s aim is not to defend the duty to delay giving aid, but to articulate arguments in favor of it, and show that it is a duty worth considering. My aim in this note is to show that it is not worth considering after all.

4. This premise is fairly uncontroversial among ethicists and philosophers. Economists, however, might think otherwise, for instance, arguing that the well-being of future generations should be discounted. The question of discounting in relation to future generations is of particular relevance in the context of climate change ethics. For an accessible and informative discussion see Hal R. Varian, ‘Recalculating the Costs of Global Climate Change’, The New York Times, December 14 2006, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/14/business/14scene.html?

5. Ibid., 241. Notice that Moller does not wish to defend empirical assumptions P2–P5, however, he finds them plausible and much of his argument hinges on them. Note that premises 1 to 5 are quotations from Moller’s text, while conclusion D is not.

6. Ibid., 243. He also specifies that P5 deals with a separate—although connected—issue, which is not central to his argument.

7. Ibid., 243.

8. Peter Singer, ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality’, Philosophy and Public Affairs 1 (1972): 229–43, 231.

9. Cf. Ibid.

10. Samuel Scheffler, The Rejection of Consequentialism (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982).

11. Cf. Singer, ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality’, 241, and ‘The Singer Solution to World Poverty’, The New York Times Online, 5th of September 1999, http://people.brandeis.edu/~teuber/singermag1.html.

12. For a discussion of different feasible institutional reforms that would substantially reduce world poverty see Simon Caney, ‘Global Justice: From Theory to Practice’, Globalizations 3 (2006): 121–37. For instance, Jeffrey Sachs has declared that Malaria could be fully controlled if all rich people in the world donated as little as $3 US per year. See http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/resources/transcripts/5132.html. See also the Millennium Development Goals, http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals. For scepticism see Moller, ‘Should We Let People Starve—For Now?’, 242.

13. Of course, the number of needy people might increase unexpectedly due to a natural catastrophe such as a tsunami or hurricane. But the possibility of such events (which, it should be noted, are now fairly well-predicted) cannot warrant a duty to let people starve now, so as to be able to save more, with the same amount of money, in the future. Surely, we ought to save people now and, further, respond to the humanitarian emergencies caused by natural catastrophes so long as this is not too costly to ourselves. Under present circumstances, I maintain, the ‘tolerable costs’ condition is largely met.

14. Moller, ‘Should We Let People Starve—For Now?’, 246.

15. For discussion see Joseph H. Carens, ‘Realistic and Idealistic Approaches to the Ethics of Migration’, International Migration Review 30 (1996): 156–70.

16. Moller considers this possibility, see ‘Should We Let People Starve—For Now?’, 245.

17. Ibid., 246.

18. Andrew Kuper, ‘More Than Charity: Cosmopolitan Alternatives to the “Singer Solution”’, Ethics and International Affairs 16 (2002): 107–20.

19. Amartya Sen, Poverty and Famines (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981).

20. See, e.g., Joseph Stiglitz, Making Globalization Work (London: Penguin, 2006); Darrel Moellendorf, ‘The World Trade Organization and Egalitarian Justice’, Metaphilosophy 36 (2005): 145–62; Richard H. Steinberg, ‘In the Shadow of Law or Power? Consensus-based Bargaining and Outcomes in the GATT/WTO’, International Organization 56 (2002): 339–47.

21. Thomas W. Pogge, World Poverty and Human Rights (Cambridge: Polity, 2008): esp. 118–21, 159–73.
22. Cf. Singer, ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality’, 240.
23. Moller, ‘Should We Let People Starve—For Now?’, 244.
24. Ibid., 244.
25. I am indebted to Véronique Munoz-Dardé for helpful discussion of these issues.
26. Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*.
27. Moller, ‘Should We Let People Starve—For Now?’, 246–47.
28. Cf. the example in David Zimmerman, ‘Coercive Wage Offers’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10 (1981): 121–45, 135.
29. Moller, ‘Should We Let People Starve—For Now?’, 247 emphasis in original.