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## **Debating Humanitarian Intervention: Should We Try to Save Strangers?**

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## Humanitarian Nonintervention

INTERVENTIONISTS OFTEN COMPLAIN THAT A policy of nonintervention means doing nothing. And in the face of so much human suffering, surely that's unacceptable. Surely, we simply can't stand by idly? We've got to do something.

I agree, of course, that the kind of suffering that is going on in our world is unacceptable. (Every decent person does.) But that's really not the question. The question is what the morally right response is to this unacceptable state of affairs. Or at least, that should be the question.

In most discussions, humanitarianism and nonintervention are posited as opposites. Nonintervention, we're told, means supporting sovereignty, self-determination, statism, the legalist paradigm, a Hegelian Myth, or what have you. Humanitarianism, we're told, represents a care for the lives, freedoms, and rights of individuals. And humanitarianism, of course, means intervention.

But this is an imaginary opposition. Most of the time, the truly humanitarian thing to do, the thing that really respects human life, is to refrain from using military force. Most of the time, interventions are simply too risky, imperiling innocent life, to count as genuinely humanitarian.

### A DUTY TO INTERVENE?

One might go beyond merely saying that we ought to *respect* life, of course. Often, supporters of expanded interventionism assert a duty to *protect* life as well. They assert that there a moral duty to intervene in case of crisis.<sup>1</sup>

I say "assert" rather than "argue," because the claim is rarely backed up. One way one might try to back it up would be to invoke an argument by Peter Singer. According to Singer, there is a general moral duty to help those in need. Indeed, most of us are already committed to this idea, Singer thinks. Of course, Singer's discussion concerns humanitarian aid and redistribution, not military intervention, but his arguments are easily extended that way.

Consider the following application of Singer's argument:

1. Suffering, and death from a lack of food, shelter, and medical care are morally bad.
2. *The Singer Principle (Weak Version)*: If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of moral significance, we ought, morally, to do it.<sup>2</sup>
3. *The Empirical Claim*: We can prevent suffering and death by supporting foreign military interventions.
4. Therefore, we ought, morally, to support military interventions.

1. See, among others, Oberman, "The Myth of the Optional War: Why States Are Required to Wage the Wars They Are Permitted to Wage."
2. Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1973): 229–243, 231. Note that this reflects the weaker of two principles Singer discusses.

Note the neat separation of facts and principles. Morality demands that we help those in need. How we help is an empirical question. The two are different issues, and one does not affect the other.

Most people who find Singer's principles plausible find them plausible because of a famous thought experiment:

### One Drowning Child

Suppose you are walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it. You can wade in and pull the child out, even though this means getting your clothes muddy. But this is insignificant compared to the death of the child.<sup>3</sup>

To Singer, this thought experiment illustrates the application of the more general principle just given. The only difference between One Drowning Child and the case of intervention is the empirical part. What is the same is a general moral duty to help those in need.

I agree, of course, that you ought to wade in and help the child in One Drowning Child. But this does not mean accepting Singer's general principle. For while it is true that there are important empirical differences between One Drowning Child and the circumstances of intervention, it's false to think the differences in the one case do not affect the other case.

Consider the following variation of One Drowning Child, offered by David Schmidtz:

### One Drowning Child-II

A baby is drowning in the pool beside you. You can save the baby by a process that involves giving the thug who threw the baby in the pool a hundred dollars. If you do not save the baby, the baby will die. You save the baby. A crowd

3. Ibid., 231.

begins to gather, including several more thugs carrying more babies. Seeing what you have done, the thugs throw a few more babies into the pool. The babies will drown unless you give each of the thugs a hundred dollars. More thugs begin to gather, carrying even more babies, waiting to see what you do.<sup>4</sup>

Schmidtz's point is not that this alternative thought experiment better reflects the world we live in. Nor is his point that helping people will immediately turn our world into this. Rather, the point is that the actions we choose will have consequences, and those consequences matter. Or, more precisely, the *principles* we choose will have consequences, and those consequences matter—including for what principles are acceptable in the first place.

A duty to intervene is a standing principle to intervene whenever we can alleviate need. We don't need thought experiments to know the consequences this might have. During the late 1990s Kosovo crisis, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) sought independence from Serbia.<sup>5</sup> The Albanian minority in Kosovo had long been discriminated against by the Serbian authorities. In 1991, the Democratic League of Kosovo, under leadership of Ibrahim Rugova, organized a referendum in which an overwhelming majority of voters supported independence from Serbia. Rugova proposed a tactic of peaceful negotiation with Serbia in order to work toward secession out of fear for a Serbian backlash against the Albanians.

When Rugova's peaceful strategy failed to mobilize international support for Kosovar independence, more radical

4. David Schmidtz, "Separateness, Suffering, and Moral Theory," in his *Person, Polis, Planet* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 148–149.

5. The discussion here follows Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*, 257ff. and the references therein. See also Seybolt, *Humanitarian Intervention*, 81.

groups came to prominence, including the KLA, which openly advocated the use of violent means. Because the KLA lacked popular support and was weak compared to the Serbian authorities, they settled on a strategy of deliberately provoking Serbian police and Interior Ministry attacks on Albanian civilians. Their aim was to increase civilian casualties in order to draw international attention and support, and eventually a military intervention. As Dugi Gorani, a Kosovar Albanian negotiator, said: "Every single Albanian realized that the more civilians die, intervention comes nearer."<sup>6</sup>

During February 1996, the KLA started a campaign of bombing against Serb targets, which lasted until 1998, when Serbian forces attacked the KLA with heavy weapons and air support. The Serb forces burned villages and drove hundreds and thousands of Kosovars from their homes. These attacks were quickly condemned by the Clinton administration. U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright stated in March 1998 that "we believe that in 1991 the international community stood by and watched ethnic cleansing [in Bosnia] . . . We don't want that to happen again this time."<sup>7</sup> The message was clear: this administration would not allow the human rights of Kosovars to go violated like this again.

The violence continued, leading to the NATO campaign's Allied Force. Once the campaign commenced, Serbian forces

6. A. Little, "Moral Combat: NATO at War," *BBC 2 Special*, March 12, 2000, transcript at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/static/events/panorama/transcripts/transcript\\_12\\_03\\_00.txt](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/static/events/panorama/transcripts/transcript_12_03_00.txt). Hashim Thaci, a KLA leader, openly admitted that "any armed action we undertook would bring retaliation against civilians. We knew we were endangering a great number of civilian lives." See also discussion in Seybolt, *Humanitarian Intervention*; and Hehir, *Humanitarian Intervention After Kosovo*, 111.

7. Cited in Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*, 258, following J. Steele, "Learning to Live with Milosevic," *Transitions* 5 (1998): 19.

intensified their assault on the ethnically Albanian population in Kosovo, with significant casualties, large numbers of refugees, and thousands of additional civilian deaths as a result.<sup>8</sup>

Singer might object that none of this impugns his proposed moral principle. But that would be to miss the point of One Drowning Child-II. If a proposed moral duty of intervention encourages thugs to sacrifice innocent lives so as to promote their political agendas, that fact counts against the proposed moral duty. The duties of help that we end up endorsing, if we do end up endorsing them, better actually help the people who need it the most.<sup>9</sup>

Singer seems to think that if we accept that there is a duty to save the child in One Drowning Child, then we must also accept a duty to save the child in One Drowning Child-II. And, by extension, we must accept the duty in cases of intervention. Indeed, Singer thinks we have a duty to assist anyone around the world who needs our assistance, even if this means bringing down our own living standards by a lot. (Possibly to the

8. See Seybolt, *Humanitarian Intervention*, 82. See also Alan T. Kuperman, "Mitigating the Moral Hazard of Humanitarian Intervention: Lessons from Economics," *Global Governance* 14 (2008): 219-240, offering additional evidence about Kosovo and similar dynamics more recently in Sudan.

9. It's worth noting that, in earlier cases, the international community has been quite sensitive to this issue. For example, during the imposition of a no-fly zone in northern Iraq, it was made quite clear that independence for the Kurds was off the table, since as Wheeler puts it, "any proposal along these lines would have sent shock waves through those governments in the region that had large Kurdish minorities. Moreover, legitimating secession would have established a dangerous precedent that would have placed at risk the constitutive rules of sovereignty, non-intervention, and territorial integrity in the society of states." See Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*, 158.

point where the marginal disutility of giving help is greater than the marginal utility of the help itself.)

But note that this is an *additional* claim. And it's one that doesn't follow from saying that there is a duty to save the child in One Drowning Child. It's a risky claim, too. After all, if we cannot choose between saving the child in One Drowning Child and saving all the vulnerable people in the world, we will be forced to choose between having to save everyone and having to save no one. And in that case, we may be forced to choose no one. That would be an even greater tragedy.

## PEOPLE AND PLACES

If interventionism isn't humanitarian, that doesn't mean any kind of nonintervention is humanitarian. No policy exists in a vacuum, and what we surround it with matters. Humanitarian nonintervention has to be made that way.

The aim of the interventionist is to bring peace and stability to places where people are forced to live under conditions of oppression, conflict, and war. But there are two variables to this equation: the people and the places in which they live. Unfortunately, the quality of the institutions that govern places is highly inert. Bad institutions incentivize political and social elites to keep them bad. Their extractive ways of life depend on it. And there isn't much that we as outsiders can do about it.

Fortunately, the people living in these places are not so inert. They can and often are willing to move. And we, as outsiders, can make it much easier for them to do so. The truly humanitarian response to suffering and oppression around the world, then, is not to try and fix other countries through the use of violence. The truly humanitarian response is to make it as easy as possible for those who are forced to live in these countries to leave for better places.

Unfortunately, in our world, few people have the opportunity to improve their lives in this way. Every safe and prosperous country in our world tries its best to keep immigrants out. They put up fences and walls, and post them with armed guards. They patrol their coastal waters, monitor airports, and so on. Millions who nevertheless see themselves forced to flee their homes in places like Syria, Iraq, and Sudan end up spending years in camps, in legal limbo while their asylum applications are pending, and so on.

A policy of humanitarian nonintervention is not a policy of maintaining the status quo. It requires significant and deep changes to politics as usual. But this does not tell in favor of more intervention. After all, intervention *is* politics as usual. The fact that this has not reduced conflict, disorder, and misery around the world is no reason for wanting more of it. Quite the opposite.

The real tragedy is the combination of this impermissible stance on intervention with the also impermissible position of keeping immigrants out. Indeed, I find it difficult to think of a more atrocious combination of policies than, on the one hand, an overly interventionist foreign policy, exporting violence in order to silence our conscience while on the other hand, doing one's best to trap the victims of this violence where it hurts the most.<sup>10</sup>

10. Of course, there is just as much political opposition to freer immigration as to long-lasting nation-building. However, and contrary to intervention, immigration *does* have a history of success. So, while I see no reason to think that governments will become willing to support long-lasting foreign nation-building, the prospects for more open immigration policies may be better.