

EUREKA STREET

Vol. 6 No. 10 December 1996

\$5.95





*Eureka Street
wishes all
its readers
the peace,
blessings
and unity of
the Christmas
season.*

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Cover design: Siobhan Jackson
Photograph p5 by Michael McGirr.
Graphics p11, 20, 21, 35, 37, by Siobhan Jackson.
Photographs pp16-17, 18 by Bill Thomas.
Cartoon p40 by Peter Fraser.

Eureka Street magazine
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Illusory Innocence?

Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence. Peter Unger, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1996. ISBN 0 19 510859 0 RRP \$32.95

WHILE DRIVING ON A deserted road, far away in the bush, you come upon a stranger with a wounded leg. The leg is in a bad way. Unless the stranger reaches a hospital right away, amputation may be unavoidable. You have business of your own to attend to. Taking the stranger to hospital would cost you time and bother. Further, for reasons we need not stop to explain, it would cost you quite a lot of money. Also, you would have to commandeer resources that belong to someone else, knowing full well that the owner would not consent. Still, what else can you do?—you do what most of us would do, and take the stranger to hospital.

Another day, you find in your mailbox a printed letter from UNICEF. It tells you, credibly, that in some distant and poverty-stricken place, children are dying for lack of emergency medical assistance. It asks you for a contribution. The treatment required is cheap, and sending your contribution is easy. Saving a distant child's life would cost you far less time, less bother, less money than saving the wounded stranger's leg. And you know that your contribution would make a difference: UNICEF has not enough money to pay for all the lifesaving work it would do if it could, so the more contributions, the more saved lives.

Understanding all this, you do what most of us would do: nothing. You send no contribution, you discard the letter without further thought, you let more die instead of fewer. Most of us would think it seriously wrong to refuse to come to the aid of the wounded stranger. Yet we would think it not very seriously wrong, perhaps not wrong at all, to refuse to come to the aid of the distant child.

Sending the contribution that would save the child's life strikes us not as doing what one must, but as a commendable act of optional generosity. Very strange! Because, after all, the cases are much alike. Insofar as they differ, it would seem that you have more reason to aid the child than to aid the stranger: the benefit is more, a life instead of a leg, and the cost is less.

The remarkable contrast in what we think about the two cases poses an urgent question. Or rather, two questions:

1. Could our commonsensical ethical opinions possibly be right?
2. Whether right or whether wrong, what psychological mechanism causes us to respond so very differently to the two cases?

The two questions are well worth a book, and that is the book Peter Unger has given us. And a very fine book it is: carefully argued, imaginative, fearless. Whether also it is correct in its conclusions remains to be seen.

Unger's answer to the ethical question is uncompromising: our commonsensical opinions are *not* right. Failing to aid the distant child is seriously wrong. When we think otherwise, we are under an ethical illusion. He does not rest his argument



upon any contentious system of utilitarian ethics. Rather, the case of the wounded stranger is taken to reveal the basic values that we already accept. Then we have only to ask how those same values apply to the case of the distant child. Unger's conclusion may come as a surprise; yet it is meant to have the authority of established ethical common sense. Unlike some of the utilitarians with whom he is *de facto* allied, Unger is not trying to reform the foundations of ordinary morality. He is claiming instead that we are terribly, disastrously wrong about what ordinary morality requires of us. In the case of the distant child—and in very many similar cases—ordinary morality is far less lenient than we like to think.

If Unger were arguing that each of us ought to send UNICEF \$100 every year, or even \$1000, his argument would be hard to resist. But his conclusion is far more extreme than that. Willing contributors are few, distant children dying for lack of medical assistance are many, and so their need for lifesaving contributions is inexhaustible. An argument that is cogent once is cogent

twice over. If indeed it is seriously wrong not to save the life of one distant child—even more seriously wrong than it would be not to save the wounded stranger's leg—then why is it not equally wrong not to save the life of the next distant child? And the next, and the next...?

There is nothing to shut the argument off after you have saved one life. Or after you have sent your \$100 for the year—enough, Unger informs us, to save many lives or after you have sent \$1000. Or after you have sent whatever contribution would be your fair share if, somehow, the burden of paying for life-saving medical care were being fairly divided among all the world's affluent. When you have so little left that it becomes doubtful whether you can live to give again another day, then the argument shuts off. But only then. Talk about giving until it hurts!

If we follow unflinchingly where argument leads—and Unger does—the conclusions that await us are still more extreme.

If you give all you have and all you earn, keeping back only enough to provide for your own survival, that is not enough. If you could give more by devoting yourself single-mindedly to the pursuit of wealth, you should do that too. And you should give not only all that you can earn (beyond subsistence), but also all that you can beg, borrow or steal. For did we not agree that you might have to commandeer someone else's property in order to take the wounded stranger to hospital? And is it not more important to save a life than to save a leg?

What is required of you, if Unger's argument is right, turns out to be very much more than just a substantial annual contribution to UNICEF. It is a life devoted entirely to serving those endangered distant children.

IF IT WERE THE LIFE OF A SAINT, or of an outlaw robbing the rich to give to the poor, it might have its attractions. But if it is the life of an unscrupulous money-grubber, toiling away at dirty business so as to serve the distant children in the most efficient possible way, it is altogether repellent. You are not asked to give away your life so that

the distant children may live. But neither are you asked to give away just a few trivial luxuries. You may well be asked to give away most of what makes your life worth living. And this in the name of our ordinary morality, in the name of the basic values we already accept! Somewhere, we have crossed the line into a *reductio ad absurdum*. The conclusions that supposedly follow from our ordinary morality are so violently opposed to what we ordinarily think that, somehow, the argument must have gone astray. It is hard to see just what has gone wrong. But even if we cannot diagnose the flaw, it is more credible that the argument has a flaw we cannot diagnose than that its most extreme conclusion is true.

But if the argument for the extreme conclusion is flawed, that does not mean that we are left with a cogent argument for some less extreme and more credible conclusion. More likely we are left with nothing. However much we might welcome an argument that we are required to contribute, say, \$100 annually that is not what we have been offered. Flawed is flawed. Unless somehow the flaw resulted only because we pushed Unger's argument too far, it will not automatically go away just because we stop short.

WELL THEN, WHAT IS THE FLAW? The lesson of the *reductio ad absurdum* is just that something must have gone wrong somewhere. To arrive at an answer—an admittedly tentative answer—we do best to approach the question indirectly, by way of Unger's answer to the second, psychological question: what causes us to respond so differently to the case of the wounded stranger and the case of the distant child? Here is Unger's explanation:

Often we view the world as comprising just certain *situations*. Likewise we view a situation as including just *certain people*, all of them then well grouped together within it ... often we view a certain serious problem as being a problem for only those folks viewed as being [grouped together] in a particular situation; and, then, we'll view the bad trouble as *not* any problem for all the world's other people. (p.97)

It is easy to see how this phenomenon of 'separation' might apply to our pair of contrasting cases. When you decide that you must do what it takes to save the wounded stranger's leg, you and he have met face to face, far away from anyone else; no wonder you and he are grouped together

psychologically within a salient situation. Nothing like that happens in the case of the distant child. If you limit your aid to those who are grouped together with you in a psychologically salient situation, of course you will go to far greater lengths to save the stranger's leg than you will to save the child's life.

Unger illustrates the phenomenon of separation with a plethora of examples. But his examples are fantastic, and often comical as well, and so it is harder than it ought to be to appreciate their lessons. I substitute my own contrasting pair of examples.

The first is a true story. When London was under attack by German missiles, the British devised a trick. They could have deceived the Germans into thinking that the missiles were hitting too far north. The Germans would have adjusted their aim to make the missiles hit further south. Instead of killing more people in densely populated London, the missiles would have killed fewer people—but different people—in the less densely populated southern suburbs. The deception was not tried: the Home Secretary was averse to 'playing God'. Many of us would think he had no alternative to playing God: whether he intervened to stop the deception or whether he let it go forward (or whether he acted to bring about the deception or whether he prevented it by inaction), the allocation of danger depended in any case on him. His only choice was whether to play God in a more or a less lethal fashion. If we describe his choice that way, aversion to playing God is beside the point. The right choice seems clear: to try the deception.

Contrast that case with another, set this time in the near future. Transplant surgery has been perfected, but there are not nearly enough organs to go around. Shall we snatch some young and healthy victims and cut them up for pieces? For each one we kill, many will be saved. By snatching involuntary organ donors rather than letting them live, we would play God in a less rather than a more lethal fashion. Then should we do it?—of course not! The idea is monstrous.

Why the difference in our response to the two cases? Both times, what we have is a plan to sacrifice a few to save many. When the few are suburbanites and the many are Londoners, many of us (though not all) approve. When the few are the donors and the many are those who need transplants, all of us (near enough) disapprove.

Unger's psychological hypothesis provides an answer. The Londoners and the suburbanites, and the rest of the British as well, are all in it together. Wherever the missiles

may happen to be aimed, all of Britain is under attack. Those who would be sacrificed and those who would be saved are all involved together in the same salient situation. Not so in the other case. Those who need organs are united by a shared predicament. But those who could be butchered to provide the needed organs are most naturally viewed just as uninvolved bystanders. Why should others' need for spare organs be seen as *their* problem? (Just because their organs could solve it?) So separation explains why we approve (insofar as we do) of diverting the German missiles; and why we disapprove of snatching the lifesaving organs.

Unger casts separation as the villain of his story: the malign psychological force that generates 'distorted' moral responses and prevents us from seeing what our ordinary morality really requires of us. But here Unger is resorting to mere *obiter dicta*, very exceptional in what is otherwise a tightly argued book.

I am inclined to think that Unger is right, and importantly right, about the psychology of separation; but wrong when he treats this phenomenon he has uncovered as a distorting force that clouds our moral judgment. On the contrary, separation might be a central, if under-appreciated, feature of our ordinary morality.

Unger has made it his task to find out what is required of us by the basic values we actually accept. (To repeat: he is not trying to rebuild morality *a priori* on new foundations.) If he goes in search of our accepted values, and what he finds are judgments shaped by the phenomenon of separation, why doubt that he has found just what he was seeking? Why assume that he has instead found a veil of illusion that conceals our basic values from our view?

If indeed separation is a legitimate feature of our ordinary morality, and if separation breaks the parallel between the case of the wounded stranger and the case of the distant child, then we have diagnosed the flaw in Unger's argument. It has not been shown that failure to save the child's life is as seriously wrong as failure to save the stranger's leg. It has not even been shown that it is wrong at all. We can go on disagreeing about whether failing to respond to UNICEF's solicitations is seriously wrong or mildly wrong or not at all wrong. Doubtless we *will* go on disagreeing. Unger's argument, if flawed as I suggest that it is, is powerless to settle the matter. ■

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