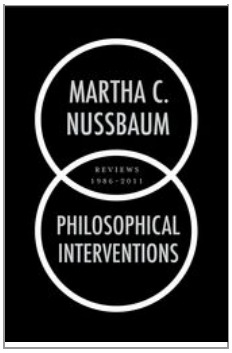

Philosophical Interventions: Reviews 1986-2011
Martha C. Nussbaum

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If Oxfam Ran the World

PETER UNGER (1996), Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter reviews the book *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (1996), by Peter Unger. Evidence suggests that there are big problems of human misery in the world, problems that should be addressed by theories both of personal morality and of global justice. Unger argues that we are culpably indifferent to this misery, and that our daily thinking about our duty to others is marked by self-serving irrationality. We typically believe that we do have a moral duty to rescue others who are at risk, especially where this can be done without great cost to ourselves. One distinction that we are fond of making to let ourselves off the moral hook is between doing harm and allowing harm to occur. Unger's study of irrationalities in our daily thinking implies convincingly that we owe others far more than we typically think we do. He maintains that a relatively affluent person, "like you and me, must contribute to vitally effective groups, like Oxfam and Unicef, most of the money and property she now has, and most of what comes her way for the foreseeable future".

Keywords: misery, Living High and Letting Die, Peter Unger, morality, justice, irrationality, moral duty, harm, Oxfam, Unicef

The basic life chances of human beings vary dramatically around the world. According to the 1996 *Report* of the United Nations Development Programme, the life expectancy of a child born today in Sierra Leone is 39.2 years, the life expectancy of a child born in Japan 79.6 years (U.S. 76.1, UK 76.3). In the developing world, daily calorie supply per capita ranges from 3223 in Barbados to 1505 in Somalia. The availability of these calories is not equally distributed in any nation, which means that there are many who suffer acute hunger. In Hong Kong in 1996, 100 per cent of the population had access to safe water, in China 67 per cent, in Haiti 28 per cent, in the Central African Republic 18 per cent, in Afghanistan 12 per cent. These facts suggest that there are big problems of human misery in the world, problems that should be addressed by theories both of personal morality and of global justice.

Peter Unger argues that we are culpably indifferent to this misery, and that our daily thinking about our duty to others is marked by self-serving irrationality. We typically believe that we do have a moral duty to rescue others who are at risk, especially where this can be done without great cost to ourselves. For example, most people would agree that a bystander has a duty to rescue a child who is drowning in a shallow pond (an example originally introduced by Peter Singer). On the other hand, we typically deny that we have a moral duty to send money to save children's lives at a distance, even though most people could do this with less effort than they would expend in saving the drowning child. This arbitrary distinction between the near and the far, Unger argues, can't ultimately be supported by any good ethical argument.

So, too, with another distinction we are fond of making to let ourselves off the moral hook: between doing harm and allowing harm to occur. If a trolley-car is about to run over six people and, by flipping a switch, we could (p.188) divert it onto a track where it would kill only one person, we would no longer feel that inaction was a secure moral

refuge (an example introduced by Judith Jarvis Thomson). But this suggests that the "out" we allow ourselves when we fail to do all we can to save people who are dying in poor countries is also irrational and self-serving; for we tell ourselves that we are not doing any harm, we are simply failing to intervene to prevent a harm that is occurring anyhow. Unger's vigorous investigation of irrationalities in our daily thinking, through these and related examples, suggests convincingly that we owe others far more than we typically think we do.

This, then, is a book on a topic of great importance, written with much moral passion by a skilful and ingenious philosopher. And yet its conclusion suggests that something is amiss. For Unger argues that a relatively affluent person, "like you and me, must contribute to vitally effective groups, like Oxfam and Unicef, most of the money and property she now has, and most of what comes her way for the foreseeable future." Unger's entire argument about our duty to give aid culminates in this recommendation; so we must take it seriously. Suppose all the people to whom it is addressed followed Unger's advice: what would the world then be like?

Oxfam and Unicef would suddenly become very rich, receiving both an annual fraction of people's incomes and significant amounts of their land and other property. Since Unger instructs us to choose these two above other charities such as religious groups and universities, for reasons I shall discuss, those other organisations would become impoverished. Religious groups would no longer maintain the charitable efforts they now support. Many universities and research centres would close their doors, no longer offering future world leaders training in economics, law, or the foundations of democracy, and no longer conducting basic scientific research on issues from AIDS to agricultural development. Nor would national and local governments be able to maintain such welfare efforts as they now fund, since so much property would have been given away. Within a few years, governments from India to Britain would be in disarray, as Oxfam became the owner of increasing amounts of everything. Although they would retain de jure authority, it is likely that governments would need to turn an increasingly large proportion of their operations over to these organisations (as, even now, NGOs operate the public education systems in some parts of the developing world).

The officers who run Oxfam and Unicef today are, it seems, excellent and competent people. But they are certainly not trained to manage a large fraction of the world's wealth, or to conduct basic scientific, medical, and economic research. This means that poverty and misery would almost certainly get much worse, as global health efforts fell into disarray, as the "green revolution" stalled for lack of intellectual input, and as debates about different types of economic organisation languished for lack of financial support.

(p.189) Nor are the officers of these charities democratically elected or accountable in any public forum. They have views about matters ranging from mandatory population control to the religious dimensions of sex inequality, with which reasonable people can disagree. But they lack any mechanism for public deliberation. Who can tell how they would respond, when offered Unger's chance to become, in effect, the government of the world?

The government of India is inefficient, ill-funded, and prone to corruption. But India is a democracy, and its government officials are accountable to its people. It is, to say the least, not clear that India would be better run by the largely foreign officials of Oxfam. Unger's solution would surely so dilute the rights and prerogatives of citizenship that most of us would be living in a world without effective liberty.

Moreover, it is by now clear that hunger is negatively correlated with political liberty: Amartya Sen has shown that freedoms of speech and of the press have a big role in averting the inequalities in entitlement that are at the root of disastrous famines. So Unger's proposal, insofar as it would undermine democracy and create a world bureaucracy of agencies, threatens to self-destruct, creating conditions in which disastrous famine could exist without effective political remedies.

Finally, we simply have no idea at all what would become of economic incentives under such a regime, but we can have a suspicion that the lot of the poorest might well become worse than in a world that tolerated some inequalities. This, at least, is the likelihood, barring a radical change in basic human psychology, although perhaps it is just such a change that Unger is imagining.

In short, the world that would result if we took Unger's advice would be one in which the very problems he cares about would get worse and in which other items that are not at the centre of his agenda, such as political liberty, would end up in a disastrous condition. Unger doesn't even try to imagine this world, and he seems not to have asked himself any questions about what would actually happen if people took his advice. This would appear to be because he has assumed that people will not take his advice and that he will remain one of a small band of moral heroes, in a world of moral sloth and corruption.

How, then, did Unger arrive at his defective and undeveloped recommendation, from the starting-point of a sharply focused ethical argument? To begin with, there are grave problems in the way the argument itself is advanced, which go some way toward explaining why Unger never bothers to imagine the world that his recommendations would create. His implied reader is a moral imbecile, an affluent person who repeatedly tosses appeals from charitable organisations into the wastepaper basket and heedlessly goes on living the high life. This imbecile is not already thinking about how to do good, and can be reached only by being bullied and hectored. Unger keeps giving us phone numbers and addresses of charities, on the apparent (p.190) assumption that we don't know how to find them for ourselves. His sentences are full of slogans and capital letters (the View that Ethics is Highly Demanding, or Pretty Cheaply Lessening Early Death). He writes as if trying to speak to someone who is not only obtuse but deaf. Even his examples presuppose moral heedlessness.

Consider his central example. Called the Envelope, and introduced at repeated intervals with the terminal self-righteousness characteristic of his style, it concerns the response we make when we receive a solicitation from Unicef. Unger can imagine no reason for our binning this other than moral blindness. Never, for example, does he consider that thoughtful people prefer to plan their giving ahead of time and to map out how much

they will give to various groups, rejecting mail solicitations because they have already made a different plan. Perhaps recognition of this fact would introduce a dangerous asymmetry between duties to rescue and duties of charitable giving. But: "it's as easy as pie" to call in and make a Visa card donation, Unger gleefully announces, having pinned us into a moral corner. And: "Now, you can write that address on an envelope well prepared for mailing." Such instructions, as to a corrupt child, fill Unger's pages. It may be doubted whether this mode of address would be persuasive with the implied reader, even if a person so stupid and venal ever turned to a book on this topic.

Although this is a work of philosophy, the implied reader is also a philosophical imbecile. Near the end of the book, Unger astonishingly announces that "most of this book's mature readers" are "academic philosophers"; a little later he suggests that philosophers should be silent in public about some of the more unpopular conclusions of utilitarian argument, such as the conclusion that we sometimes have an obligation to steal in order to relieve misery. So whatever one might have thought, it turns out that he's been addressing professional philosophers all along. But it's a rare member of that profession who would get to the final page, given the work's lack of nuance and of engagement with the work of others.

Unger offers a crude choice, for example, between two philosophical methodologies: that of the "Preservationist," who likes to conserve as many of our current moral intuitions as possible, and that of the "Liberationist," who accepts Unger's brand of revisionary utilitarianism, rejecting some of our moral intuitions as ill-founded. It may be doubted whether any good philosopher has ever been a Preservationist, and Unger offers no discussion of the way intuition and ordinary belief are treated by serious non-utilitarian philosophers such as Kant and Rawls. Nor does he show us any reason why, having thrown over the traces of convention, we should choose to be utilitarians, rather than Kantians: none of the questions separating those two traditions is so much as mentioned. Only a philosophically illiterate reader (who is also pretty unimaginative as a human being) would believe that these two positions exhaust the space of morality. Unger's previous work has (p.191) not prepared us for such oversimplifications, and one can only suppose that they are dictated by the intensity of his moral passion.

Nor is there any sophisticated discussion here of the writings of the many other people who have laboured on the question of beneficence and global obligation. Writers such as Derek Parfit, Liam Murphy and Shelly Kagan from the utilitarian tradition, Thomas Nagel, Thomas Scanlon, and Thomas Pogge from the Kantian, Gerald Cohen, Brian Barry, the economists Amartya Sen, John Roemer, and Partha Dasgupta, all get a nod in a footnote at most, and we hear nothing informative about how their arguments would be addressed. Major historical contributors such as Kant, Bentham, and Adam Smith don't even get a nod. So the implied reader is not a reader of philosophy (despite Unger's claim to the contrary), and can therefore be led to believe that evangelist Unger is a voice crying in the wilderness, rather than one of many thoughtful people who have been addressing the question for ages.

These problems in Unger's philosophical approach help explain why he doesn't give his own conclusion much realistic scrutiny. But there are other problems, connected with the excessively narrow approach he chooses. A helpful philosophical account of human misery and our responsibilities to alleviate it should address at least the following questions.

1. What would a good theory of global political justice look like, and how would it describe the basic entitlements of individuals and nations? Unger offers no help on this question, since he is basically not interested in institutional and political issues.
2. In the absence of globally just institutions, how stringent are the moral obligations of individuals to relieve human misery? Kant long ago argued that we have duties of beneficence only because "the injustice of governments" has created inequalities of wealth; he also argued that our duties of beneficence are "imperfect duties," allowing latitude for special obligations to the near and dear. Thomas Nagel has recently developed this position further. Unger confronts this question, offering his extremely stringent answer. But because he doesn't link it sufficiently to a question about the obligations of political institutions, he never adequately responds to the arguments put forward by Nagel and others who would distinguish the two spheres of obligation.
3. Are we morally required to devote only money and resources, or also time and effort? Unger spends one page on his question, apparently saying that we should devote both, but he doesn't offer any guidelines about how we should weigh these different contributions. (Indeed, he suggests that academics should become corporate lawyers if they can, so that they will have more money to give (p.192) away—once again slighting the contribution thought makes to practice.)
4. What should be the goal of our efforts: to maximise the sum of satisfactions? To maximise human functioning and capability? To maximise the access of individuals to certain basic resources? To ensure to as many people as possible a certain basic level of satisfaction, or of capability, or of resources? To maximise the situation (on any of these dimensions) of the least well-off? These questions have been at the heart of much of the modern debate about equality and global redistribution, but Unger neglects them completely, although at times he would appear to assume a classical utilitarian answer.
5. Should we think of human life as consisting of a single dimension, along which we can move individuals higher or lower, or should we think of it as consisting of a number of distinct dimensions, all of which should be promoted in any meaningful social policy? Again, this is a much discussed question on which Unger says nothing. It is highly pertinent to his eventual recommendation, since Oxfam and Unicef deal with some aspects of human existence (food, water, basic medical care, in some cases primary education), but leave others unattended (political liberty, religious freedom, higher education, artistic expression).
6. Should we, as givers, operate with a conception of the good that is our own, or should we attempt to promote a situation in which the recipients of our donations have choices to avail themselves of what we give in accordance with

their own conceptions of the good? Can we usefully distinguish between a core of political values, which we may promote without offence to the liberty of others, and a more comprehensive set of values, which we may not impose on others through coercive political action? Again, nothing is said about this, and yet it seems crucial in determining the direction and admissible scope of our efforts.
7. What are the most effective strategies, if we want to use our resources to achieve one of the goals set forth under Number Four? This is a very tough question, involving many empirical issues (for example, issues about economic incentives), most of them under dispute. But there is one thing we can say: that there are many good-faith strategies people can take, without being moral imbeciles. Giving money to "élite institutions" may not be such a bad way of promoting progress in solving terrible social and economic problems. Giving to religious institutions is another way, both because those institutions support a great deal of direct relief and because they organise and assist the lives of poor people in many non-material ways. (Unger's brusque rejection of these groups is apparently based on the false belief that they do not relieve misery.) Writing a book or (p.193) going into politics or becoming a development economist is yet another way. Any defensible conception of human well-being ought to include a role for such contributions.

At the same time, any meaningful solution to the problems of developing countries must involve economic and structural planning and the appropriate use of markets. Direct giving, if it undermines these structures, will probably make things worse. That is not to say that public action and private philanthropy should not be combined with the market. Sen, for example, has written well about how these different approaches might be combined. But we certainly don't want to produce the situation Unger shoots for, where Oxfam runs the world.

Even in addressing the strictly economic aspects of human well-being, we are forced almost immediately to turn to other aspects. If we take the relief of acute hunger to be our only goal, we still must ask whether this is best promoted by addressing hunger directly, or by promoting political liberties, female literacy, and other constituents of a human being's quality of life. Unger is not unaware of these interrelationships, as one brief discussion shows; but he gives us no framework for thinking about them.

What, then, does Unger's book contribute? His discussions of the distinction between duties to rescue and duties to aid, and his general diagnosis of irrationalities in our thinking about people at a distance, are both ingenious and cogent. Much of this is not entirely original, however: many of the distortions that Unger describes have been recognised since Plato's *Protagoras*, and Unger's reliance on Peter Singer and Judith Jarvis Thomson for core examples is obvious. Nonetheless, he is a resourceful thinker who complicates the examples in interesting ways and adds others of his own. If one can abstract long enough from all the questions that crowd in unanswered, one may well find that he has made some progress towards establishing the stringency of our obligations to aid. A modest, tight, and interesting book could have been written along these lines. It

would call into question many of the ways in which we live, and provoke the thoughtful reader to reflect on the seven questions and the practical challenge they contain. It would thus be an appropriate prolegomenon to a richer and fuller work in which the seven questions (or at least some of them) would be thoroughly tackled, and the competing answers of a variety of philosophers and economists debated.

Unger's sense of moral urgency betrays him, however. Because he is so eager to get readers to do *something* (even if it is strategically quite the wrong thing, at least those selfish folks won't be living so high and at least some good will in the short term be achieved), he short-circuits the work of reflection, and ends up offering little of philosophical interest. Philosophy is not political speechmaking or evangelistic arm-twisting. It offers nothing if not nuance and sustained reflection, and delicate theory-building. In the (p.194) process of getting philosophy to be more practical, Unger has ultimately sold it out.

In Response to:

If Oxfam Ran the World, from the September 4, 1997, Issue

From Peter Unger:

In her review of my *Living High and Letting Die*: *Our Illusion of Innocence*, Martha Nussbaum notes that I address the reader with the claim that an affluent person, "like you and me, must contribute to vitally effective groups, like Oxfam and Unicef, most of the money and property she now has, and most of what comes her way for the foreseeable future." She refers to this as "Unger's solution" to the heartbreakingly serious problems plaguing impoverished people in the poorest countries in the world. She tries to reduce this "solution" to absurdity by developing a vision of how the world would be if *everyone* were to comply with my injunction. Obviously the result would be chaos, as she observes at great length. But this is a bewildering misreading of my work. The injunction she cites was addressed to the conscience of the individual reader in the world as it is—a world in which governments do very little to save dying children in impoverished regions and in which organisations such as Oxfam America, US for Unicef, and Care together receive less money from private donations than Harvard University does. The injunction was, of course, conditional on the wholly realistic assumption that even after my book had its full foreseeable effect, this state of affairs would continue: that for the foreseeable future there would be no radical institutional changes, that most affluent individuals would continue to donate next to nothing, or even nothing at all.

My question was: in this actual situation, what should you, a person interested enough to be reading my book, do? My answer: give most of what you have in order to help save children who will otherwise die of preventable disease and malnutrition. The book offers several salient arguments in support of this but not one is so much as mentioned, much less addressed or discussed, in the review.

I never pretended to have articulated a programme for saving dying children by means of

co-ordinated collective action at the institutional level. Doubtless it would be vastly more efficient to proceed at that level; and perhaps some day the world will be receptive to rational reforms of the global economic system. But until this Utopian condition prevails, there is much that a single individual can and should do.

Nussbaum also criticises the book for being insufficiently engaged with issues of theory. It doesn't offer "delicate theory-building," doesn't explain why we might or might not "choose to be utilitarians rather than (p.195) Kantians," and fails to say whether our goal should be "to maximise the sum of satisfactions…to maximise human functioning and capabilities" or whatever. But my concern in the book was explicitly not with theory-building, delicate or otherwise. Indeed, the strategy of my work was to avoid drawing my conclusions from all such evidently controversial theories, and instead to show that our own deepest moral beliefs themselves commit us to the costly conclusions for which I argued. It would of course be wonderful to solve all the problems of international distributive justice in a way that is economically rational, culturally sensitive, and based on a defensible account of the human good. But my ambitions didn't extend nearly that far, and it is fantastic that Nussbaum takes me to task for having failed to solve all the relevant problems which, as she notes, many excellent thinkers are working on.

As is indicated in Oxfam America's latest annual report, Nussbaum and I may well be the two American philosophers who most strongly support that organisation. It's with considerable sadness, then, that I read her distorted account of my book. Her focus on a fantasy world run by Oxfam is an irrelevant distraction from the serious problems with which Oxfam is concerned.

Peter Unger

New York University

From Peter Singer:
Martha Nussbaum writes that Peter Unger's "reliance" on Judith Jarvis Thomson and me for "core examples" diminishes the originality of his book. Her review shows, however, that she has failed to see where that originality lies. While Unger does start from an old example of mine, as he himself says at the outset, this example and the argument I built on it has—twenty-five years later—left many people unconvinced. Unger extends the example in ways that I never imagined, making the argument infinitely more difficult to escape.

The suggestion that Unger's originality is diminished by his reliance on examples from Judith Jarvis Thomson is even more startling. A significant body of philosophical literature has arisen around the "trolley problem" devised by Thomson (who, incidentally, got the core example from an article by Philippa Foot). Unger has effectively destroyed this body of literature. Thomson and others who have discussed the trolley problem rely on our common intuitions about a series of cases, and then draw moral conclusions from them. Unger has shown that these intuitions are affected by ethically insignificant factors in the way the examples are framed, the order in which they are

presented and so on. No one will ever again be able to defend the use of trolley problem examples—or arguments based on intuitions in specific cases of these kinds—without dealing with Unger's critique.

(p.196) Nussbaum does not like Unger's style. I find it original, amusing, and engaging, but I can easily see that some would find it extremely irritating. Less understandable, however, is Nussbaum's failure to discuss the central arguments of the book she is reviewing. Instead she goes off into a long account of "what if everyone did what Unger is suggesting?" This is transparently irrelevant to his arguments, which are based on the assumption—obviously true for the present and the foreseeable future—that a modest donation to an overseas aid organisation, of the kind that a middle-class person living in a developed country can easily afford, can do a lot towards saving lives. Nussbaum's argument is on a par with the argument that it is wrong to work late in order to avoid driving home in rush-hour traffic, because if everyone did that, the rush-hour would simply come later. I thought philosophers had long ago understood that the argument cannot be applied in so simplistic a fashion. Nussbaum has missed an opportunity to engage with the argument of one of the most significant works of ethics published this decade.

Peter Singer

Monash University

From Martha Nussbaum:

Peter Singer's response to my review of Peter Unger's book is strange, for he defends the aspects of the book that I praised and says nothing in defence of those that I criticised. I did not hold the non-originality of Unger's examples against him; I simply pointed it out. I said that Unger's "discussions of the distinction between duties to rescue and duties to aid, and his general diagnosis of irrationalities in our thinking about people at a distance, are both ingenious and cogent," and added that "Unger is a resourceful thinker who complicates the examples in interesting ways and adds others of his own."

My complaints against the book lay elsewhere. I objected to Unger's crude discussion of philosophical method, to his failure to grapple seriously with the arguments of others, to his failure to engage with non-utilitarians or to defend his own narrow utilitarian framework, and, especially, to his total failure to confront institutional and political issues that must be taken account of in any good analysis of duties to aid. I mentioned seven questions, all commonplace in recent political philosophy, that need to be addressed in any such work, and noted that Unger is silent about six of them. The non-addressed questions include such basic ones as: what would a good theory of global justice look like, and how would it describe the basic entitlements of individuals and nations? What should be the goal of our efforts: to maximise the sum of satisfaction? To maximise human functioning and capability? To maximise the access of individuals to certain basic resources? To ensure to as many people as possible a certain basic level of satisfaction, or of capability, or of resources? To maximise the situation (p.197) (on any of these dimensions) of the least well-off? (Those are two of the six.) Unger makes claims

that he cannot make plausibly without consideration of such familiar questions.

Unger makes, very seriously, a practical recommendation—we should all give most of what we have to Oxfam—that, if followed, would be disastrous. This fact is hardly irrelevant to the assessment of what he has accomplished. Philosophy of this sort cannot afford to be naive armchair rumination. Irresponsible speculation brings philosophy into discredit in just those circles where good philosophy may possibly do some good (a fact that Singer, a practical philosopher very concerned with fact, must know well). Even when ideal theory is in question, philosophy must confront economic and political realities. Many fine modern writers on international justice and the relief of hunger are aware of this. Unger is not.