

ing airily about the equality of all people, to insist on cramming it down our throats — which is how ordinary people do see it.

It is reasonable, then, to arrive at a general understanding that we shall be ready to help when help is urgent and when giving it is not very onerous to us. But a general understanding that we shall help everyone as if they were our spouses or dearest friends is quite another matter. Only a thinker whose heart has been replaced by a calculating machine could suppose that to be reasonable.

### Is There a Duty of Charity?

One of the good things we can do in life is to make an effort to care about people about whom we don't ordinarily care or think. This can benefit not only the intended beneficiaries in distant places, but it can also benefit you, by broadening your perspective. There is a place for the enlargement of human sympathies. But then, these are sympathies, matters of the heart; and for such matters, family, friends, colleagues, and co-workers in things are rightly first on your agenda. Why so? First, just because you are you and not somebody else — not, for example, a godlike "impartial observer." But there is another reason of interest, even if you think there is something right about the utilitarian view. This is what amounts to a consideration of *efficiency*. We know ourselves and our loved ones; we do not, by definition, know strangers. We can choose a gift for people we know and love, but are we wise to try to benefit someone of alien culture and diet? If we do a good thing for someone we know well, we make an investment that will be returned as the years go by; but we have little idea of the pay-off from charity for the unknown. Of course, that can be overcome, once in awhile — you might end up pen pals with a peasant in Guatamala, but it would not be wise to count on it.

The tendency and desire to do good for others is a virtue. And it is a *moral* virtue, for we all have an interest in the general acquisition of this quality. Just as anyone can kill anyone else, so anyone can benefit anyone else; and so long as the cost to oneself of participating in the general scheme of helpfulness is low — namely, decidedly less than the return — then it is worth it. But it is not reasonable to take the matter beyond that. In particular, it is not reasonable to become a busybody, or a fanatic like Dickens' character Mrs. Jellyby, who is so busy with her charitable work for the natives in darkest Africa that her own children run around in rags and become the ter-

ror of the neighbourhood. Nor is it reasonable to be so concerned for the welfare of distant persons that you resort to armed robbery in your efforts to help them out ("Stick 'em up! I'm collecting for Oxfam!").

### Notes on the Real World

If we are persuaded by the above, then as decent human beings we will be concerned about starvation and inclined to do something to help out if we can. This raises two questions. First, what is the situation? Are there lots of people in danger of imminent demise from lack of food? And second, just what should we do about it if there are?

Regarding the first question, one notes that contemporary philosophers and many others talk as though the answer is obviously and overwhelmingly in the affirmative. They write as though people by the million are starving daily. It is of interest to realize that they are, generally speaking, wrong, and in the special cases where there really is hunger, its causes are such as to strikingly affect our answer to the second question.

It turns out that starvation in the contemporary world is *not at all* due to the world's population having outgrown its resources, as Garrett Hardin and so many others seem to think; nor is the world even remotely a "lifeboat," as implied by the title of a famous article by Onora O'Neill ("Lifeboat Earth").<sup>28</sup> In fact, it has come to be appreciated that the world can support an indefinite number of people, certainly vastly more than there are now. If people have more children, they can be fed, or at least there is no reason why they couldn't be, so far as the actual availability of resources is concerned; nor does anyone in the affluent part of the world need to give up eating meat in order to enable them to do so. In 1970, harbingers of gloom and doom on these matters were reporting that by the 1990s there would be massive starvation in the world unless we got to work right now, clamping birth-control measures on the recalcitrant natives. Now in 1992 there are perhaps a half-billion more people than there were then, and — surprise! — they're all eating, and eating better at that. All, that is, *except* for those being starved at gunpoint by their governments or warring political factions. Meanwhile, Western nations are piling up food surpluses and wondering what to do to keep their farmers from going broke for lack of demand for their burgeoning products.