Bluejay

We must maximize our reception to those who are in pain, for our ability to act in ways that are sympathetic, compassionate, and generous is written into the very fabric of our humanity and encoded into our evolutionary core to survive as a species. We are only capturing the full extent of the human experience when we are moved by those who share our humanity. It is contrary to our human nature to see the suffering of others and still allow them to suffer. Helping those in absolute poverty should be obligatory, for denial to those humans who need help is denial of the full spectrum of our human identity. Even when we do not recognize our humanity, we still have the responsibility to act humanely. For this reason, we should set up societal structures and mechanisms—such as communal obligatory aid towards those in absolute poverty—to encourage people to act in ways that do not violate their own and others’ humanity. If our meaning and highest goal comes from our acknowledgement of what it means to be human and to be entitled to certain human rights, then it should not be optional to act in a way that creates the most meaningful and dignified lives—as long as the generous actions from an individual do not cause harm onto them or meaningfully subtract from their own dignity.

The first basis for the argument for obligatory communal aid is that humans have the basic right to live dignified and meaningful lives. This can be rooted in the philosophy from Immanuel Kant. His argument for human rights “depends on the idea that we are rational beings, worthy of dignity and respect” (Sandel, Justice). In Kant’s own words, “every rational being exists as an end in himself.” If human beings, and the preservation of their dignity and rights, is the ultimate end and goal in this life, then we should all act in the ways we are capable of promoting this. Under this thinking, an individual’s freedom to spend the entirety of their money in the exact ways they wish is not as important as another individual’s right to live a dignified life. Inside absolute poverty, it is not possible to live such dignified life. Those who suffer deserve a type of human dignity they are not able to obtain within this poverty. Therefore, those with the economic means to help aid those in absolute poverty should be required to help…for the right a human being has to a dignified life is worth far more than any other economic entitlement.

In the past, the value and survival of humans came through our ability to help one another. Singer describes this within the realm of moral evolutionary psychology when he writes, “we have the ability, under special circumstances, to shut down our petty selves and become like cells in a larger body, or like bees in a hive, working for the good of the group” (*The Righteous Mind).* We have not come so far, evolved so long to become rational species with the capabilities to care and sympathize with one another just to ultimately build societies and systems that permit an individual’s will to no longer help others. It is contradictory to our nature and our very survival as a species. It is only when we feel a disconnect from our humanity that we could allow so many in our species to suffer for so long and so violently. We are distracted from the things that matter, disconnected, and that’s when our “honeybee” instinct and the part of our human soul that was created to be compassionate and sympathetic fails to reveal itself….and we allow others to suffer a type of suffering that we are able to prevent. We are not all completely innately selfish and harmful human beings, but we do harm when we forget who we are and how it is we have gotten so far (by helping and being helped by other humans). Until we can see ourselves in the sufferer (see our shared humanity), we will continue to let them suffer. We allow for basic human rights to become violated, and (from a greater perspective) demean the worth of a human, when we refuse to others the aid that could feasibly help relieve them from their human suffering and degradation.

My second basis for obligatory communal aid to those in absolute poverty comes from Darwin’s argument of human morality and the notion of the “evolution of altruistic and sympathetic tendencies” (De Waal). In the words of De Waal about Darwin’s moral evolutionary theory, “it is important to dwell on the capacity for sympathy hinted at here…To be vicariously affected by the emotions of others must be very basic.” Even the father of our capitalistic system (Adam Smith), which is the system that holds the basis for many arguments against obligatory aid, “wrote about the universal human capacity of sympathy” (De Waal). He wrote, “How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortunes of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it” (Adam Smith). This suggests that it is tangible to keep the economic system that has allowed for our prosperity as a country so far *and* simultaneously incorporate mechanisms into this system that provide for generosity and care towards those who are suffering. If it is part of our human nature to give and care for others, and we have evolved as humans to have the rational ability to build structures that are able to align with our sympathetic capabilities, then communal obligatory aid appears to be the most humane option. It stems from a recognition of our humanity. When we witness the failure to act in aiding, it is a result of the fact that many of us have forgotten who we are as human beings. We have become numbed to the things that make life the most worth living and that incorporate the totality of our human nature and capabilities.

It is the idea of human nature that further supports the idea of aid. Although suffering is sad for the sake of the sufferer, it is also sad for those who are letting them suffer. The allowance of suffering violates our humanity, violates the nature encoded into our evolutionary core. It is the fact that we can be kind, can be loving, can be compassionate, can be moved by other humans, that has gotten us where we are a species today and brings meaning to our lives. We lose meaning, and suffer in a nuanced way, when we refuse to be moved with sympathy and generosity (emotional responses we have depended on for survival) towards others. This loss of meaning can be seen through the astounding levels of unhappiness and depression within the country (despite the fact that we are one of the wealthiest countries). New research suggests some of this unhappiness is linked to failure to give and understand a greater sense of community. In support of this is the study “by researchers Dunn, Akin, Aknin, and Norton,” which found that “people who spent a higher proportion of their income on prosocial spending (gifts for others and donations to charity) compared to personal spending (bills/expenses and gifts on themselves) were happier” and that, in summation, “giving to others gives us pleasure” (Huffington Post. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brady-josephson/want-to-be-happier-give-m_b_6175358.html)>. We fail to give to others when we fail to understand the connection they have to ourselves. It takes recognition of this intimate connection to others to understand the suffering we create within ourselves when we are not moved by another human’s suffering. It takes a slight rethinking of the meaning of aid to see that it offers more of a mutual gain to both parties than it does a loss to one individual for the advantage of another. We are enriched and given meaning, tapping into the full spectrum of human emotion and potential, when we are moved by the situations of others to become generous and caring. It is part of what it means to be human. If we aren’t able to be moved by other human beings, why are we here? Why are we *all* here existing together, as humans, if we are to live life unaffected by others…as if we were islands?

In reality, even if we view ourselves as islands, there is no way to live our lives in a manner that does *not* impact the world and people around us. We have an intimate connection to the world and people around us, even when we fail to acknowledge it. Our perception of reality does not change reality. It is in this reality that I find another basis for obligatory aid. Beyond philosophical theories and ideas of human nature, there is a historical reality that also obligates us to acknowledge and address absolute poverty through our aid. Even if we deny our human and evolutionary nature, the simple fact that we (in developed nations) are partially the cause of the suffering for those who are in absolute poverty demands our aid. Historically, our ability to become industrialized and wealthy has depended upon on our use and exploitation of many of these very countries that are now in extreme poverty. We have a moral obligation to the negative consequences of our action.

Since we can really only make a significant change—and truly give redress for our past abuses—through the contribution of many, the aid must be communal. The effectiveness, not just the intention, of the aid matters because our moral debt to these countries is only paid when we have concretely helped relieve the suffering we have caused. Although it is honorable for individuals to choose to help to aid the absolute poor, the generosity of a few individuals will not effectively combat the poverty and suffering we have caused. Since we (in developed nations) have collectively contributed to the suffering, we must collectively relieve the suffering. In this way, the obligatory aid must be communal—for otherwise it does not measure out to be enough to make a significant impact on the poverty we have collectively caused.

\*\*P.S to peer editors! My points feel a little bit scattered to me/not organized well and I am having a hard time trying to organize it a little better. So if while you were reading this, there were any points or sentences that seem like they would fit better somewhere else (or if there are any other larger places that were confusing with order, ect), it would be super helpful if you could point them out for me and give me some suggestions and help with those places…and recommendations for organization!! Thank you so much!