Reply to Horton

JOHN KEKES

In 'On the Supposed Obligation to Relieve Famine,' (*Philosophy* 77 2002), I argued that Singer's amazingly influential view is moralistic humbug. It cheapens serious moral claims to hold, as Singer does, that those who fail to contribute at least one-tenth of their income to relieve famine 'are all murderers'. There is an obligation to aid those who live in poverty through no fault or choice of their own, provided there is no stronger moral claim on one's resources and the aid is likely to reach its intended recipients and help them. But, I pointed out, relatively affluent people meet this obligation by paying in taxes about one-fifth of their income, and this is double of what Singer arbitrarily deems to be the acceptable minimum. Calling murderers those who do not do even more is an attempt to do by bullying what Singer fails to do by giving reasons. It would have improved matters if Singer had replied and provided the missing reasons, but he has not done so. Keith Horton, however, does reply, albeit not to defend Singer's view, but to claim that my arguments fail to show that there is no obligation to do *something* to relieve famine. He says that there are empirical studies about the effectiveness of aid and it is 'bizarre' that I have not considered them.

It has apparently not occurred to Horton that the reason why I have not considered the empirical studies is that they are irrelevant to the conclusion stated in the last sentence of my original article: 'But as to the supposed obligation to give more [i.e. more than one already pays in taxes]—an obligation that would be immoral not to meet—the case for it has not been made.' Why, then, are the empirical studies Horton chides me for ignoring irrelevant? Because, first, the question of whether there is an obligation to give more than one already does is moral, not empirical, so empirical studies cannot decide it. Even if one assumes that empirical studies show that aid is effective, the question of whether it would be immoral not to give more remains obviously open. Perhaps there are more or equally urgent obligations closer to home, such as educating one's children or aiding the local poor, perhaps the leaders of people in need of aid are responsible for their plight; perhaps the aid will help them a little, but would make a great difference elsewhere. Horton should

doi:10.1017/S0031819104000294
©2004 The Royal Institute of Philosophy

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819104000294 Published online by Cambridge University Press

know that it is a standard feature of many serious moral disagreements that parties to them agree about the facts and disagree about their moral significance. Empirical studies cannot help in such cases.

Second, I am not claiming, of course, that facts are irrelevant to moral questions. But the facts that I have appealed to are elementary ones with which empirical studies, as well as reasonable people, simply begin. Such facts, for instance, that if a family is starving, it is because it has not enough food for all its members; that if a family has more children, it will have more mouths to feed; that although affluent countries have been spending enormous sums to aid Africa, for instance, it has brought no noticeable improvement to the condition of the poor who are being raped, mutilated, and murdered in tribal wars, and ravaged by AIDS and malnutrition; or that the population in countries in need of aid increases at a great rate and so does the need for aid. Empirical studies can quantify these facts and explain the causes whose effects they are. But they must begin with them. And it is such elementary facts I have used in arguing that the case has not been made for the immorality of not giving more than one already does.

Third, Horton simply ignores the crucial consideration that affluent people already routinely meet their obligation by paying taxes. A substantial portion of these taxes, one-fifth of affluent people's income, is spent by the 'experts' whose authority Horton repeatedly emphasizes. If anyone, then these much-vaunted experts are in a position to decide how all this money is to be spent, and they do decide it, although without discernible success to their credit in Africa for instance, but let that go. What the supposed obligation is meant to foist on people is guilt for not giving even more. Now people may do that out of generosity, but to claim that they are immoral if they do not spend their after-tax income to aid the poor in distant lands is a travesty. They have obligations to their own family, to help local causes, and their lives would be as bleak as the moralists willingly doom all lives if people could not derive some pleasure from the money they earn.

Fourth, I have just given reasons why Horton's objections to my argument miss the point even assuming that the effectiveness of aid has been established by empirical studies. But empirical studies have established nothing of the sort. As Horton himself admits: 'I do not claim, of course, to have established any alternative conclusions [i.e. conclusions alternative to the one I have reached in the original article] about those questions here.' He concludes that 'one must await a more patient, careful, and empirically informed kind of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819104000294 Published online by Cambridge University Press

philosophy in order to assess the Aid Claim.' From which it follows that the assessment of the Aid Claim is open, and that, in turn, means that the case for the obligation to go beyond what one already pays in taxes has not been made. And that is the conclusion I myself have reached at the end of the article to which Horton inconsistently objects.

New York

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819104000294 Published online by Cambridge University Press