Famine and Fanaticism: A Response to Kekes

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In a recent paper,[1] John Kekes argues that '[t]he supposed obligation to relieve famine is based on a rationally indefensible rampant moralism' (503). Much of the paper is devoted to a critique of Peter Singer's arguments for extremely demanding obligations of this kind. But Kekes also expresses the concern that, even if they reject Singer's extreme views, 'decent people will recognize that they ought to do *something* to alleviate the suffering of those who live in absolute poverty' (511, emphasis in original). And he then argues that there are 'good reasons to reject even this much weakened position' (ibid.).

Call this 'weakened position'—the claim that those of us who are relatively affluent, by global standards, ought to do something for those who live in absolute poverty—the *Aid Claim*. In this paper, I discuss the arguments Kekes makes against this claim.[2] As will emerge, I think that those arguments are very weak. This makes my task here rather limited and negative, but it is nonetheless an important one. Though the arguments Kekes uses do not often emerge in philosophy journals, they do appear to influence the thinking of many people about issues concerning aid. Given this, and the urgency of those issues, it is important to point out any major shortcomings in those arguments.

1

What reasons does Kekes give, then, for rejecting the Aid Claim? The first is based on the view that those living in absolute poverty—

[1] 'On the Supposed Obligation to Relieve Famine', *Philosophy* 77 (2002), 503–17. All otherwise unattributed references are to this paper.

[2] Naturally, this means that I do not discuss many other issues that Kekes considers in his paper. In addition, I am not confident that I address all of Kekes' arguments against the Aid Claim. For he raises a great number of considerations in the relevant section of his paper (511–16), and it is not always easy to discern the exact structure of his argument. I do believe, nonetheless, that I discuss all of the considerations that Kekes himself puts most weight on.

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the 'global poor', as I shall call them—are, at least in large part, responsible for their own suffering. He writes (513):

> It is an easily foreseeable consequence of their actions that if they increase the size of their families they will have to divide up their resources among more people. If they live in poverty, absolute or otherwise, this will worsen their condition. No reasonable person can fail to see this. If people nonetheless increase the size of their families and end up in or perpetuate their absolute poverty, then they are responsible for their own and their children's easily foreseeable suffering.

A number of comments are in order here. I shall begin by sketching one or two of the more obvious and familiar factors which Kekes ignores. First, then, there is the fact that as well as consuming resources, children may produce them—not immediately, but in time. This factor is particularly important in societies that lack adequate pensions—children may be one's best insurance against destitution in old age. As one expert on the relevant issues puts it:

> High fertility in poor families need not reflect irrational decisions on the part of poor parents, even though it reduces family resources per capita in the short run. On the contrary, it can reflect reasonable decisions on their part—to ensure greater family income once children start working, or to ensure their own security in old age via support from their children.[3]

A second factor which Kekes ignores is that childhood mortality among the global poor tends to be high, and so parents cannot be confident that all their children will survive to adulthood. In such circumstances, having many children may be the best way to ensure that at least one or two do so.[4] Of course, if the childhood mortality rate drops significantly, as it has done in most developing countries in recent decades, then parents may find that they have more children than they had anticipated. When information about such

[3] Nancy Birdsall, 'Government, Population, and Poverty: A Win-Win Tale', in Kerstin Lindahl-Kiessling and Hans Landberg (eds.) *Population, Economic Development, and the Environment* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 182. See also Partha Dasgupta, *An Inquiry into Well-Being and Destitution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), ch. 12.

[4] As Elizabeth Willott says, 'With high childhood mortality rates in some areas of the world an individual woman might bear seven or eight children but only have two survive to adulthood' (Elizabeth Willott, 'Recent Population Trends', in *Environmental Ethics: What Really Matters, What Really Works* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 277).

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reductions is absorbed, however, parents tend to adjust by having fewer children.[5]

These, then, are just two reasons to think that those of the global poor who have many children may not be quite as irresponsible as Kekes thinks. Of course, it is very difficult to judge such matters, and many complex factors need to be taken into account. But this brings me to my second point. Kekes takes no account of any of the work done by economists, demographers, and others on the relevant issues. He does not cite any such research, and nothing he writes gives any indication that he is familiar with it. But surely this is an unsatisfactory way of tackling substantive moral questions. Given that the answers to such questions often depend on complex empirical matters, it is necessary to give some attention to the research conducted on those matters, and to what the relevant experts say. This point strikes me as being so obvious and uncontroversial that it should not need to be made. But Kekes ignores it.

What bearing, in any case, are Kekes' claims about the alleged responsibility of the global poor for their own suffering supposed to have on the Aid Claim? He writes (512, emphasis in original):

> If [the suffering of the global poor] is an easily foreseeable consequence of their immoral or imprudent actions, then it is hard to see why other people should have an obligation to relieve *their* plight rather than the plight of others who have not brought their suffering on themselves.

And on the basis of this claim, and the claim that the global poor are largely responsible for their own suffering, Kekes goes on to conclude that, rather than helping the global poor, we are obligated to help others who do not live in absolute poverty, but are not responsible for their own suffering (513–14).

Again, there are a number of oddities here. For one thing, there is an obvious reply to the challenge Kekes poses in the passage just quoted. Even if the global poor were culpably responsible for their own suffering, it would still seem callous to many of us to neglect them, given how bad their plight is and how little it would cost us to help them. Even those who take a strong line on personal responsibility are likely to pause before claiming that it is morally permissible to let people *starve to death*, for example, even if they are responsible for their own suffering, and even if the resources spent on them could be used to help others who are not responsible for

[5] For more on this, see §4 below.

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their own suffering. At the least, such a claim would need strong argumentative support—support which Kekes fails to provide.[6]

In addition, it is not clear why Kekes concludes that we should direct resources away from the global poor in general. For his argument would seem to apply only to those of the global poor who have voluntarily chosen to have many children. And thus the majority of the global poor—including children, those who do not have large families,[7] and those who do have large families, but not voluntarily[8]—would seem to be quite untouched by his argument.[9] Even if Kekes were right that it is morally permissible to neglect those of the global poor who voluntarily have many children, then (and of course he has not in fact shown this), he would still have provided no reason why it might be permissible to neglect the rest of the global poor.

I conclude that those who think that considerations concerning personal responsibility defeat the Aid Claim need to supply much better arguments than Kekes provides. Now let's turn to the next reasons that Kekes gives to question that claim.

2

Kekes then goes on to argue that the affluent are not obligated to give aid unless they have good reason to believe that such aid will be effective. Making judgements about such matters, however, 'requires considerable knowledge of the context in which sufferers live, which the vast majority of affluent people cannot be expected to have' (514). He continues (515):

[6] The subject is all the more complicated in view of the fact that responsibility, in the relevant sense, is evidently a matter of degree. But this, again, is a matter which Kekes fails to take account of in the argument which we are examining.

[7] The fertility rate has, in fact, declined considerably in most developing countries in recent decades. For some statistics, and further references, see §4 below.

[8] It appears that there is frequently conflict about this matter between husbands and wives, the former often preferring more children, the latter preferring fewer. But often it is the husband's will which holds sway. Thus many women who have many children do not do so voluntarily.

[9] Unless one simply assumes that it is acceptable to let those who are not culpably responsible suffer and die for the alleged faults of those who are. Kekes himself raises this point a little later: see 515–16. I discuss what he says there in §4 below.

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> If [affluent people] could not make reasonable judgments of this sort, they would have to accept the judgments of various local politicians and aid workers, and they would have to decide whether these judgments are trustworthy. Since both the politicians and aid workers have a vested interest in attracting aid, there would be a prima facie reason not to take their judgments at face value.

Kekes mentions no other sources from which more reliable evidence might be gained. And so he goes on to conclude that it is unlikely that the condition in question will be met, and hence unlikely too that the obligation holds (514–15).

What to make of this? The claim that we are not obligated to give aid unless we have good reason to believe that such aid will be effective is a plausible one, and I shall not argue with it here.[10] But the notion that we have nothing better to go on than the judgments of 'local politicians and aid workers' when tackling this question is just bizarre. For there are, of course, many other and more reliable sources on which to base a reasoned opinion about aid effectiveness. There are, for example, the many studies of 'official' aid (aid given by governments) that have been produced.[11] And then—of even more relevance for potential donors—there are the various independent evaluations of projects conducted by NGOs (non-governmental organisations).[12] And in addition, there are the various publications of those who spend their lives researching such matters.[13]

Once again, as with the research on poverty and fertility that I cited in the last section, Kekes simply ignores all of this data. His

[10] Evidently, that claim is in need of some refinement, taking into account such factors as how probable and how good or bad the various effects of different forms of aid might be. But I shall not go into these matters here. For present purposes, I shall simply assume that, under some such refinement, the claim in question is correct.

[11] For a general review of such studies, with many references to the primary data, see Robert Cassen, *Does Aid Work*?, 2nd edition, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

[12] The best starting point for accessing such data that I know of is Sten-Erik Kruse, et al., *Searching for Impact and Methods*, at [http://www.valt.helsinki.fi/ids/ngo]. Again, this work is a kind of general review, and contains many references to more detailed studies.

[13] For discussion of the work of NGOs, in particular, see, for example, Michael Edwards and David Hulme (eds.), *Non-Governmental Organisations—Performance and Accountability* (Earthscan, 1995); and David Sogge (ed.) *Compassion and Calculation: The Business of Private Foreign Aid* (Pluto Press, 1996).

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claim that we lack the kind of evidence on which to base a reasonable verdict, then, is apparently based on simple ignorance about the range of data that is available. Once again, this is rather astonishing. But the more important point is that, given the data in question, it is indeed possible for potential donors to come to a reasoned view about the effectiveness of aid.

Does that data—to return to the key substantive question—give one good reason to believe that certain forms of aid, at least, are effective?[14] On my reading, it does, though I do not have space to say much in support of that verdict here.[15] As one might imagine, the research is complex and multi-faceted, and does not easily lend itself to brief summary. I will point out, however, that there does appear to be a strong consensus among the experts that certain forms of aid are effective.[16] Beyond that, I can only suggest that it is for each person to explore the research in question for themselves, and form their own opinion.

I will have to leave the key substantive question here open, then. But I have said enough, I believe, to show how weak Kekes' argument is. For his claim that we lack the data on which to establish a reasoned opinion about the effectiveness of aid agencies turns out to be based on a massive underestimation of the data available.

4

Kekes then goes on to articulate two questions which, he suggests, may come to mind at this point (515):

> One is about the fate of the children born to imprudent parents who live in absolute poverty: is there no obligation to aid these children? The other is about the division of responsibility

[14] I say 'certain forms of aid' because aid comes in many different forms, some of which appear to be more effective than others.

[15] I do, however, respond to two commonly voiced concerns about the long-term effects of aid, concerns that Kekes himself raises, in §4 below.

[16] Might such experts have similar incentives to Kekes' 'local politicians and aid workers' to claim that aid is effective? If anything, quite the opposite. Most studies of aid projects are conducted with an eye to improving practice. As such, they naturally focus on problems and shortcomings. And one does not make a name for oneself as an aid academic by arguing that current forms of aid are just fine as they are. One does so, rather, again, by pointing out problems and shortcomings. For both of these reasons, much of what experts on aid write is likely to be disproportionately focused on the negative side.

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> between the leaders of people who live in absolute poverty and the people themselves: is there no obligation to aid people if their wretched conditions are largely the consequences of the stupidity or immorality of their leaders?

And he responds to these questions as follows (515–16):

> The hard fact is that the aid that may be given will only be window-dressing that produces, at best, short-term relief and perpetuates the conditions that produce absolute poverty. For the children who are helped will grow into adults who will have children. The temporary improvement of their condition will make the population living in absolute poverty grow faster than it would without aid. And that will make absolute poverty worse in the long run, not better. Nor will the acceptance of the obligation be seen as reasonable if it is born in mind that it will strengthen the rule of the stupid or immoral leaders who are more or less responsible for absolute poverty.

Kekes' way of proceeding here, then, follows what has by now become a familiar pattern. His argument depends on certain empirical claims, but he does not take any account of the research that has been conducted on the relevant empirical matters. Instead, he just makes certain statements about them that apparently seem obvious to him. And, once again, I make two responses. First, I repeat that this is hardly a satisfactory way of tackling substantive moral issues. I take it that this point is uncontroversial and that I do not need to labour it again. And second, though once again I do not have space to discuss the relevant empirical issues in any detail, I will sketch one or two of the more obvious and familiar reasons to question Kekes' claims, as well as giving some references to the relevant literature for those who want to find out more.

The research that already cited in §2 above, in fact, provides certain reasons to question what Kekes says about population growth. According to that research, two of the factors that lead the poor to have many children are insecurity about their children surviving to adulthood, and fears of destitution in old age. Given this, it appears likely that aid directed at reducing infant mortality, at providing security for old age, and more generally at fostering social and economic development is likely to reduce the birth rate. And this is exactly the conclusion which the relevant data supports. As Amartya Sen puts it:

> In country after country the birth rate has come down with more female education, the reduction of mortality rates, the expansion

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> of economic means and security, and greater public discussion of ways of living.[17]

Of course, as I said in §2 above, if childhood mortality decreases, then in the short term population is likely to rise. But, as I also said there, once people register the fact that childhood mortality has gone down, they tend to start having fewer children, and so population growth peters out. As Robert Cassen puts it:

> One effect of economic development is first to reduce mortality, which increases population growth, and then, usually with a time lag, to reduce fertility, eventually to the point where it barely exceeds mortality and population growth slows to a minimum—the process known as the 'demographic transition'.[18]

By now, most of the world is already well into this transition. To quote from the United Nations Population Division 2002 Update:

> During the past quarter-century, the average number of children per woman decreased from 4.5 to 2.7 …The population growth rate declined gradually, from about 2 per cent, an all-time high, to 1.3 per cent today.[19]

Fortunately, then, leaving people to starve or to die of easily preventable diseases is not the only way to slow population growth. Indeed, doing so is likely to be counterproductive in such terms in the long run.[20] For the reasons given above, fostering genuine social and economic development serves *both* to improve the lives of the poor here and now, *and* to foster long-term, sustainable reductions in the birth rate.

I will have to give even less space to Kekes' other claim, that aid will strengthen the rule of 'stupid or immoral' leaders (516). The risk is genuine, of course, but the proper response is not to conclude that we should abandon aid, but rather to look for forms of aid that

[17] 'Population: Delusion and Reality', *The New York Review of Books*, September 22, 1994.

[18] Robert Cassen, 'Overview' to Robert Cassen (ed.) *Population and Development: Old Debates, New Conclusions* (Overseas Development Council, Washington, DC, 1994), 4.

[19] [http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2003/pop850.doc.htm], 17.

[20] As Robert Cassen puts it, in response to someone arguing in a similar way to Kekes: 'He actually argues that because population growth is so damaging, it is mistaken to try to save lives until fertility has declined. This flies in the face of all the evidence that in very many settings the improved survival of children has been virtually a *precondition* for fertility to fall' (*Population and Development*, 26, n. 23).

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are unlikely to have such effects. And, in fact, there are a variety of strategies that are being tried: funding groups that are opposed to such leaders; organizing projects aimed specifically at fostering good governance; directing aid to countries that have good leaders and policies; and so on. Naturally, there is a whole literature on the problems and potential solutions in this area, a literature which Kekes once again simply ignores.[21]

On these as on other empirical questions, then, it appears that Kekes has rushed to the conclusions that are most threatening to the Aid Claim without considering either what might be said on the other side, or what those who specialise in studying those questions think. This is clearly unsatisfactory. I do not claim, of course, to have established any alternative conclusions about those questions here. But I have sketched some of the more important factors which Kekes neglects, and also given references to some of the data on which such conclusions might be based. Beyond that, one must await a more patient, careful, and empirically informed kind of philosophy in order properly to assess the Aid Claim.[22]

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[21] See World Bank, *Assessing Aid* (Oxford University Press, 1998) for further discussion of the problems and potential solutions here, and for further references.

[22] I would like to thank Emma Rooksby for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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