

Cohen on responsibility

1 What is Cohen's argument here?

What emerges from the above is that each person does indeed have a moral duty to prevent suffering and not to let other people die—or rather not to let this happen foreseeably, since we are presumably not responsible for consequences of our actions that we could not reasonably be expected to have foreseen. But it does not follow that each person has a moral duty to give up all expenditure on inessentials and contribute his savings to organisations for the relief or prevention of famine. And the reason why that conclusion does not follow is that it is quite false to say that the ordinary citizen of an affluent country who fails to make so total a contribution is therefore failing to prevent suffering or is letting somebody die.

Imagine a very simple situation, devoid of the contrasts that tend to submerge rational judgment in an emotional swamp—contrasts between north and south, white and black, developed and developing, and so on. Two small agricultural communities occupy opposite sides of a mountain range on a remote and inaccessible island. Because of climatic differences one community prospers, while the other is near starvation. Some, but not all, members of the richer community contribute a tenth of their own produce to feed the poorer community. But because others have not contributed at all some members of the poorer community die of starvation or malnutrition whereas, if everyone in the richer community had contributed his tithe, no-one in the poorer would have died. Who is morally responsible for these deaths? Those who didn't give anything at all or those who, knowing that the others were giving nothing, gave no more than their tithe? That is the crux of the matter.

2 Responsibility and the intransitivity of 'let'

1. Singer's principle holds us responsible for making up for others. It holds that the failure to do so in the case of famine amounts to letting people die.
2. We are responsible for making up for others only if responsibility for letting things happen is transitive.
3. Responsibility for letting things happen is not transitive.
4. Therefore we aren't responsible for making up for others.

3 Examples

1. Greater than: A is greater than B and B is greater than C, therefore, A is greater than C.
2. Parent of: D is the parent of E and E is the parent of F, but D is not the parent of F.
3. Letting: G lets H let I die from famine. Did G let I die from famine?