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CHAPTER I

A thorny question

Among Christians there has been general agreement that loving concern should extend to all, including enemies, and that love in the heart should manifest itself in deeds. Concerning what those deeds should be there has been much less agreement. Indeed, Christians' views have diverged at every level of moral discernment – with respect to all actions, general types of action, specific types of action, and individual actions. At the second, next-to-most-general level, on which this study will focus, various Christian preference-rules vie for recognition or jostle for precedence. With respect to self and others, competing rules have varied from self-preference at one extreme to denial of all self-seeking at the other. With respect to specific categories of others, there has been somewhat greater consensus. Christians have agreed, for example, both that preference should go to one's nearest and dearest, to some extent, and that preference should go to the neediest, to some extent. However, to what extent? Suppose these two preferences come into conflict, as they frequently do, and nearest vie with neediest. What then?

A TROUBLING VERDICT

Philosophers as well as theologians have grappled with this question; and society at large has had its own, less formulated views. Some decades ago, the Cambridge philosopher A. C. Ewing remarked: "It is clear that the money spent by a man in order to provide his son with a university education could save the lives of many people who were perishing of hunger in a

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famine, yet most people would rather blame than praise a man who should deprive his son of a university education on this account."[1] Both parts of Ewing's judgment sound plausible: the action might save many lives, and most people here or in Britain – including many Christians – would nonetheless condemn it. Indeed, as James Rachels has observed:

> Most people seem to believe that one has an obligation to provide the necessities of life for other children only after one has already provided a great range of luxuries for one's own. On this view, it is permissible to provide one's own children with virtually everything they need in order to have a good start in life – not only food and clothing, but, if possible, a good education, opportunities for travel, opportunities for enjoyable leisure, and so forth. In the United States children of affluent families often have TV sets, stereos, and new computers, all laid out in their own rooms. They drive their own cars to high school. Few people seem to think there is anything wrong with this – parents who are unable to provide their children with such luxuries nevertheless aspire to do so.[2]

The same attitude may be taken, notes Frank Sharp, "when the alternatives are the good of a friend and that of an acquaintance, a neighbor and a stranger, a fellow-countryman and a foreigner, a member of one's own race and a member of another race."[3] One should prefer the interests of the friend, neighbor, countryman, or member of the same race, even though less benefit results overall.

To have a convenient term, suggests Sharp, we may say that representatives of this viewpoint favor the *good of the nearer.* " 'Nearer' here means nearer to the agent in the sense that he or she feels bound to the individual in question by ties of affection, friendship, blood, personal gratitude, or congeniality of tastes and interests."[4] Within the bounds thus amply drawn, Ewing's case pits the nearest of the near (one's own children) against the neediest of the needy (starving strangers).

Some ethicists favor one side,[5] some the other,[6] while still others confess their perplexity.[7] The issue Ewing poses is difficult, and troubling.

On the one hand, a verdict in favor of the starving might carry alarming implications. If parents should not finance

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something as important as their children's higher education, what of other, less intimate relationships, and what of other, less important expenditures? "What about the children's music lessons, the family camping trips? Hardly the necessities of life"[8] – yet should they all go? Should nothing but strict necessities – shoes, socks, soap, paper – surround the Christmas tree? Should there even be a Christmas tree? Troubling question follows troubling question, not only for parents, children, grandparents, cousins, friends, and others, faced with similar options, but also for those affected by their decisions. If parents should not finance their children's higher education, what follows for people like myself? Should I teach in a university that parents should not support? Should the admissions office recruit their children or the university's development office solicit their funds? Given the pressing needs of the destitute, should there even be an institution such as Saint Louis University? Common sense offers reassuring answers to these and similar queries, or dismisses them as quixotic. However, is common sense trustworthy?

Its verdict, favoring the son over the starving, prompts as grave misgivings as does the contrary verdict – misgivings about our culture and its "necessities,"[9] misgivings about the "common sense" that renders such a judgment.[10] Our moral perceptions, like our other perceptions, are subject to a law of perspective: "Matters which are near to us, both psychically and physically, loom large; we consider them more important. And since our reactions reflect our assessment of the various possible outcomes, our actions too typically reflect this bias to what is near to us."[11] A cutting remark disturbs our sleep; a distant disaster does not. Thus it appears, as Hume noted, "that in the original frame of our mind, our strongest attention is confin'd to ourselves; our next is extended to our relations and acquaintance; and 'tis only the weakest which reaches to strangers and indifferent persons. This partiality, then, and unequal affection, must not only have an influence on our behaviour and conduct in society, but even on our ideas of vice and virtue."[12]

What inclination fosters, familiarity affirms. Our tendencies

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gain strength from our surroundings. Thus Peter Singer has observed:

> Given a society in which a wealthy man who gives 5 percent of his income to famine relief is regarded as most generous, it is not surprising that a proposal that we all ought to give away half our incomes will be thought to be absurdly unrealistic. In a society which held that no man should have more than enough while others have less than they need, such a proposal might seem narrow-minded. What it is possible for a man to do and what he is likely to do are both, I think, very greatly influenced by what people around him are doing and expecting him to do.[13]

And what the individual considers right and morally acceptable is strongly influenced by what others consider right and morally acceptable. So the majority opinion which Ewing cites in support of his verdict may also cast doubt on its validity.

Bias shows when Ewing argues:

> It still seems plain to me, and I am sure would seem so to almost everybody else that, if a man were to deprive his wife and children against their will of all comforts and purchasable pleasures, leaving them only bare necessaries, on the ground that he could use the money thus saved to preserve several families from a greater pain or loss of happiness than he inflicted on his own by giving it to a charitable organization he would be acting wrongly not rightly.[14]

Why "against their will"? Why thus load the dice? If the man's wife and children agreed, would the deed still be plainly wrong?

Ewing's choice of witnesses elicits still stronger misgivings. "Most people," he says, would agree with him; but what of the starving? Would they agree that they should die and the son should get his university education? If not, who would be the biased ones? Might not the destitute have a more realistic appreciation of what was at stake than Ewing or the rest of us ensconced in Western comfort? Might not the deprived have sharper mind-sight than we to spot our rationalizations?[15]

The great disadvantage, it seems, of the distant people whom we might save is their anonymity. To us, they have no names, no faces, no life histories, no goals, hopes, and aspirations, no loved ones dependent on them or distressed by their plight.

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They are mere ciphers. What chance, then, do they stand in competition with our nearest and dearest, whom we know so intimately? How could a father possibly agree that he should assist such nonentities and leave his flesh and blood in the lurch?

Even the slaves whom their masters demoted from full humanity were more real than these remote wraiths. So were feudal serfs. So were the Indians whom Spaniards, Portuguese, and other colonizers despised and mistreated. So were the wives, mothers, and daughters who for so long occupied a secondary status. They at least had names and faces. Will distant, faceless strangers therefore be the last to join the human race? And do we, the well-to-do, now stand in their regard as masters, lords, colonizers, and husbands once stood with respect to slaves, serfs, natives, and wives? Is that why Ewing's verdict sounds so commonsensical? Will future generations view our common sense as one more instance of moral blindness, comparable to these prior instances?[16]

"Fifty years ago," comments Joseph Sneed, "it was at least tolerable to most people in developed nations that a good portion of the rest of the world's population lived at or near the starvation level for their entire, rather short lives. The number of people for whom this is a tolerable situation appears to be diminishing."[17] Are we then witnessing a phenomenon similar to the erosion of support for slavery? "Perhaps," surmises Susan James, "this neglect will look as outrageous to our descendants as slavery now seems to us and the justifications offered for it as self-serving and contradictory as the moral beliefs of plantation owners."[18]

Queries and misgivings multiply. How would we react if the starving acquired faces? What would our verdict be if the competing parties stood before us – the well-fed son on the left, hankering (perhaps) for a university education; a tottering grandfather, emaciated father, grieving mother, and skin-and-bones children on the right, pleading for minimal subsistence? How would we judge a parent who took from the son to assist such specific, desperately needy individuals? How *do* we regard such sharing?

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In *The Starved and the Silent*, Aloysius Schwartz tells of visiting Mrs. Rhi, a Korean mother of six. Their shack, slapped together with canvas, tar paper, cardboard, and old lumber, had no plumbing, electricity, or sanitation. The family, supported by scavenging, had the bare minimum to stay alive. And yet, "Her children frequently would bring home orphan waifs and beggars picked up in the streets whom she would feed and clothe. As a matter of fact the whole family seemed to have inherited the mother's generous heart."[19]

Such generosity may be rare, but Schwartz's admiring reaction to it is not. At the turn of the century, Edward Westermarck reported:

> Captain Hall holds an equally favourable opinion of those Eskimo with whom he came in contact. "As between themselves," he says, "there can be no people exceeding them in this virtue – kindness of heart. Take, for instance, times of great scarcity of food. If one family happens to have any provisions on hand, these are shared with all their neighbours. If one man is successful in capturing a seal, though his family may need it all to save them from the pangs of hunger, yet the whole of his people about, including the poor, the widow, the fatherless, are at once invited to a seal-feast."[20]

In these real-life instances, the lineup shifts. Multiple, hungry children – Mrs. Rhi's, the Eskimos' – replace the single, well-fed son; so the destitute have much stronger competition. Yet the reaction of Schwartz, Hall, Westermarck, and others – perhaps ourselves – is one of admiration, not condemnation, when these parents take from their nearest and dearest to share with still needier neighbors.[21]

The Eskimos were not Christians. Neither was Mrs. Rhi. Yet Schwartz speaks of her "Christ-like" attitude. Should Christians be less generous? Would it be wrong for them to do as she did? What does the much-touted "preferential option for the poor" amount to if it means denying the starving so that the well-fed may flourish?[22]

These queries are not arguments. They are only straws in the wind, blowing the other way, against Ewing's verdict and the dictates of "common sense." I find Ewing's case problematic, and I think other Christians should too. What light, then,

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can Christian ethics, assisting and assisted by moral philosophy, throw on this troubling sample and the dilemma it poses?

A PARADOX

Contemporary Christian ethics reveals this paradox: the issue of nearest versus neediest is much more pressing today than in earlier times, yet is much less closely studied now than then.

First, the issue is more pressing, for three reasons:[23]

(1) Thanks to modern means of production, the wealth of whole nations – indeed of whole regions – is unprecedented; yet their wealth contrasts starkly with the deprivation and misery of other nations and regions.[24] According to a recent estimate, approximately 786 million people – one in every five – in the developing world are chronically malnourished.[25] More than half the world's people go hungry every day.[26] "Today," declares an Oxfam America circular, "34,000 children will die as a result of hunger and malnutrition."

(2) Thanks to modern communications, this contrast is known, in general and in detail. "We are the first generation," wrote William Temple in 1977, "to hear the cry of the suffering expressed from every corner of the world, and knowledge brings responsibility."[27]

(3) Thanks to modern modes of transportation and social organization, we are now much better equipped to meet these global needs. "Until very recently," notes Earl Winkler, "it was only in what can be roughly characterized as emergency situations that any possibility existed of saving others through the sacrifice of the self, or a child, friend, etc."[28] Today, as Rachels observes, "with relief agencies ready to take our assistance all over the world, needing only sufficient resources to do so, it is almost as easy to provide food for a child in Africa as to provide for one's own. The same goes for providing basic medical care: International relief agencies carry medical assistance around the world on the same basis."[29]

Given these changes, most better-off people now face the

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kind of dilemma Ewing described. The issue of nearest versus neediest cannot be avoided. Whoever might devote resources of money, time, or energy to a child, parent, spouse, friend, or neighbor might devote them instead to far needier people. And the alternative is constantly present, on a daily basis, as it was not earlier. A famine or plague might strike, and then it would pass. Beggars generally were not starving, and the alms they asked posed no great threat to one's nearest and dearest. Thus moral theologians of the past sometimes remarked how little application their treatment of nearest versus neediest had in real life – even as they studied the problem in sometimes lavish detail.[30]

Contemporary Christian ethics has no comparable treatment to offer.[31] Yet more than ever contemporary Christians need light on this vexing issue. How to account for this paradox? I can think of various likely reasons for contemporary neglect, and I shall mention some of them, so as to indicate more fully the need for the present study. Reasons for the neglect suggest reasons for remedying it.

(1) The new world situation not only makes the problem more pressing; it also makes it more troubling. Always difficult, the issue is now thornier than ever. Whoever grasps it firmly may be forced to painful conclusions. Whoever does not grasp it firmly should not bother to grasp it at all; better to remain silent than to waffle. So abstention is understandable. However, if the issue is not only pressing but also deeply troubling, this adds further reason to consider what light Christian ethics can shed on it.

(2) In the *Summa theologica*'s treatments of the order of charity and of almsgiving, Aquinas confronted the issue of nearest versus neediest more carefully and fully than his predecessors had. Cajetan and others elucidated Aquinas's teaching; Bañez, Suarez, Vasquez, de Lugo, de Soto, de Toledo, de Vitoria, and others amplified and nuanced it;[32] and manualists perpetuated it far into the present century. Accordingly, some recent ethicians may have seen no need for further discussion. The matter had received adequate attention.

For reasons chapter 5 will indicate, I do not share this

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favorable judgment. In some respects the Thomistic tradition has been admirable. However, its treatment of nearest versus neediest has suffered from notable defects: its conflating the service of nearest with the service of self, its preferring self to others, its placing great weight on social status, its neglecting the considerations which figure most prominently in the present inquiry. A new treatment is needed.

(3) Protestant ethicians long looked askance at Catholic casuistry, and doubtless many today, Catholic and Protestant, harbor sentiments akin to those of William Sherlock:[33]

> Had God prescribed how much every man must give to the poor, they might have observed this proportion of giving without any charity, and then such gifts as these had been no acts of charity, when the gift and the charity was parted: but a charitable man will give in proportion to the degrees of his charity, and therefore charity and the increase of charity is the only proper object of command; for he will give liberally, who loves much; and the proportion of giving is commanded in the degrees of charity, and will observe a just proportion.[34]

In short, "Love, then do what you will."

There is something right about this Augustinian saying. Loving acts are subjectively admirable, and well-regulated love is objectively admirable. But what kind of love, precisely, is well regulated? Love, if genuine, desires to be well informed, lest its good intentions go for naught.[35] It follows, then, that genuine love will recognize the need for deliberation and discernment – especially when one valid love vies with another. What is the "just proportion" that Sherlock alludes to?

(4) Current antipathy to "charity" and "almsgiving" – "things that were shown to be out of date by the end of the Middle Ages"[36] – also deflects attention from Ewing's question. So does the conviction that individual charity does not suffice. "Can the rich churches of the north, vis-à-vis the poor of the south, rectify the situation simply by means of alms – a mechanism, now familiar, of exploitation and injustice?"[37] "'Giving to charity' is like an aspirin to dull the pain, but does nothing to cure the illness."[38]

To start with this last grievance, it is true and important that

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individual giving cannot cure the systemic ills that permit or occasion massive suffering. But so long as these ills remain – hence for the foreseeable future – such assistance may make the difference between life and death, misery and a tolerable existence, for many people. As Schwartz observes, "Although individual charity may not be enough, at least it is a step, a start, a striking out in the right direction – and this is infinitely better than merely wringing one's hands or rending one's garments."[39]

Besides, the issue of nearest versus neediest reaches beyond giving and other forms of individual assistance. Practically any move toward social justice involves both the nearest on the one hand and the neediest on the other, vying for limited resources. "An option for the poor," writes Donal Dorr, "is a commitment to struggle against structural injustice. Those who make such an option are in solidarity with the victims of our society, and with them they set out to work for a more equitable sharing of power and resources in society and in the Church."[40] They do so at a cost not only to themselves, but also to their nearest and dearest. As Stephen Pope has noted, these and other special ties are frequently slighted. "Discussion of the preferential option too often tends to oversimplify our responsibility to the poor by effectively ignoring the multitude of other concrete responsibilities that comprise and shape our lives."[41]

(5) Recently, emphasis has fallen more on public than on private remedies. Ewing's concerns may therefore seem passé. The government should do what individuals cannot do, or cannot do as effectively. However, political endeavor, at whatever level, can be analyzed in terms either of social wholes or of the individuals who compose them. If it is viewed atomically, in terms of the actions of individual voters, legislators, or office-holders, then they have kin, friends, neighbors, clients, or compatriots who may be affected by their decisions. If, instead, political endeavor is viewed collectively, as carried out by social wholes (cities, counties, states, nations, corporations), then they may be subject to preference-rules analogous to those for individuals. Whether, how, and to what extent the considerations that apply in the private sector apply also in the public

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