Debate about the responsibilities of affluent people to act to lessen global poverty has dominated ethics and political philosophy for forty years. But the controversy has reached an impasse, with the main approaches either demanding too much of ordinary mortals or else letting them off the hook. In *Distant Strangers* Judith Lichtenberg shows how a preoccupation with monistic moral theories and concepts such as duty and obligation have led philosophers astray. She argues that there are serious limits to what can be demanded of ordinary human beings, but that this does not mean that we must abandon the moral imperative of lessening poverty. Drawing on findings from behavioral economics, psychology, and other disciplines, she shows how we can harness the efforts of better-off people to lessen poverty without excessively taxing their moral virtue. Lichtenberg argues convincingly that this approach is not only practically, but morally, appropriate.

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For David
# Contents

*Preface*  
ix

1  Introduction  

2  Entanglements and the claims of mere humanity  

3  Duties and rights, charity and justice  

4  “Negative” and “positive” duties  

5  Oughts and cans  

6  Why people do what others do – and why that’s not so bad  

7  Whose poor? / who’s poor?: deprivation within and across borders  

8  Hopefully helping: the perils of giving  

9  On motives and morality  

10 Conclusion: morality for mere mortals  

*Works cited*  

*Index*  

253  

272
Preface

This book has been a long time coming. In graduate school, many years ago, I was inspired by the crystalline version of libertarianism articulated in Robert Nozick’s 1974 book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* – inspired, that is, to show why this view was dead wrong. My dissertation argued that libertarianism rests on an undefended and indefensible distinction between “negative” duties not to harm and “positive” duties to aid, and in turn between action and omission. I wouldn’t put the point quite this way today, but the animating idea persists as one of the main themes of this book. In the course of writing my dissertation I was lucky to meet Henry Shue, whose book *Basic Rights: Subsistence, Affluence, and U.S. Foreign Policy* was soon to appear. Henry’s work helped push my thinking further along.

I continued to think and write about these questions over the years while working on other projects. But the plan to write a book took shape only much later. Like many other moral philosophers over the last decades, I was interested in the question “What are the moral responsibilities of comfortable people to alleviate poverty?” But I became convinced that to decide what people ought to do, we need to know what it is reasonable to expect them to do, which requires an understanding of human motivation and behavior. Defending this idea and exploring its implications have been the central themes of this book.

Another theme is that we are indebted, for who we are and what we achieve, to more people than we know – literally and figuratively. But it is gratifying to be able to acknowledge some of these debts explicitly. I spent twenty-five years at the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy at the University of Maryland, where there really was a “we” constituted not only by great colleagues but also good
friends. Other colleagues at Maryland, and at Georgetown, where I have taught in the philosophy department since 2007, have also provided support and constructive feedback. And my students in both graduate and undergraduate courses over several decades of teaching have impelled me to sharpen my thinking about these issues.

Two idyllic visits away from my academic home gave me the intellectual space and leisure to write the book. Early on in its development, I spent a wonderful year, 2005–6, at Stanford University’s Humanities Center, where my fellow fellows, mostly from other disciplines in the humanities, cast a somewhat skeptical eye at my way of formulating the questions and answers but in so doing pushed me to sharpen them. Other friends in the Stanford community also improved my thinking on these subjects. In 2011, as a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University, I wrote much of what was to become the final version of the book in the company of a group of scholars and friends with complementary interests. With less leisure but a still wonderfully stimulating environment, I completed the book in 2012–13, while teaching at the Center for Transnational Legal Studies, a consortium of law schools from around the world based in London. Presentations that year at CTLS, University College London, Nuffield College, Oxford, and the University of Edinburgh helped bring the project to fruition.

I presented earlier versions of these ideas at numerous places in the United States and elsewhere and published some papers whose descendants appear in the book. Members of those audiences and readers of those earlier works, as well as others in conversation along the way, helped me write a better book than I would otherwise have done. Among those I especially want to thank (aware that I am forgetting others) are Charles Beitz, Stephen Campbell, Alexandru Cojocaru, David Crocker, David Enoch, Arthur Evenchik, Kyle Fruh, Verna Gehring, Ralph Glass, Robert Goodin, Karla Hoff, Stacy Kosko, Daniel Luban, David Miller, Edward Minar, Nate Olson, Gwen Pearl, Matthew Pianalto, Joel Roberts, Jeffrey Schaler, Jorn Sonderholm, Karen Stohr, and several anonymous reviewers of articles previously published. I have also benefited
from the experience of friends and family members who have participated in humanitarian efforts on the ground. Among them are Patrick Byrne, Nate York, Arthur Evenchik, Rachel Luban, Alec Lichtenberg, and Michelle Sullivan Lichtenberg.

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Claudia Mills, David Wasserman, Rachel Luban, and David Luban read the entire manuscript. I am enormously appreciative of their good sense, intelligence, and verbal gifts, not to mention many specific comments that have improved the manuscript. Also valuable were the comments of an anonymous reader for Cambridge University Press.

Finally, I am deeply grateful to my friends and to my family for love and support over the years. When this book began gestating I had no way of knowing that my children, Daniel and Rachel, would contribute to it intellectually as well as providing emotional sustenance. But I owe most to my husband, David Luban. As no one who knows him will be the least surprised to hear, David has provided unending encouragement and enthusiasm, not to mention being a continual fount of ideas, information, arguments, stories, and (not least) laughter and wit. I could not have written this book without him.

Earlier versions of parts of the book have appeared elsewhere, although in all cases there have been revisions, often substantial, since the original publications.

Most of Chapter 4 was published in *Ethics* 120 (2010) as “Negative Duties, Positive Duties, and the ‘New Harms.’”


An ancestor of part of Chapter 6, “Consuming Because Others Consume,” was originally published in *Social Theory and Practice* 22 (1996).

Part of Chapter 8 was published in *Philosophy & Public Policy Quarterly* 29 (2009) as “What Is Charity?”