Distant Suffering

Morality, Media and Politics

Luc Boltanski

Translated by Graham Burchell

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The politics of pity

1.1 Pity and justice

In the second chapter of her essay *On Revolution,* 'The Social Question',[1] Hannah Arendt takes up the idea that in contrast with the American Revolution, the French Revolution neglected the question of liberty and of the form of government able to guarantee it. It developed instead a *politics of pity* that, if its typical manifestations became apparent only with Robespierre and Saint-Just, had been in preparation since the mid eighteenth century, notably in the work of Rousseau. Her characterisation of this politics is based on specific features that can be summarised briefly. First of all, it involves a distinction between those who suffer and those who do not. As Max Scheler notes, we do not say that a father and mother who weep over the body of their child experience 'pity' for him or her precisely because they are themselves also suffering misfortune.[2] Secondly, there is a focus on what is seen and on looking, that is, on *the spectacle of suffering*.[3] What is meant by spectacle in this context? To a large extent Hannah Arendt's demonstration consists in drawing out the latent implications of a politics which is distinguished by not being centred directly on *action*, on the power of the *strong* over the *weak*, but on *observation*: observation of the *unfortunate* by those who do not share their suffering, who do not experience it directly[4] and who, as such, may be regarded as fortunate or *lucky* people.

To start with, let us note that a *politics of pity* is clearly distinguished from what could be called, to make the comparison clearer, a *politics of justice*.[5] As a first approximation we could describe action coming from above taken by rulers seeking to promote justice as *meritocratic*, whatever norm is used to define and evaluate the respective merits of citizens. In all likelihood, such a politics will be based upon what we have elsewhere called a *City model*.[6] According to this model, the proper function of the magistrates who administer the city is the resolution of disputes. Their prudence

consists in the successful restoration of harmony by arriving at fair out-
comes to disputes. A politics of justice is therefore more or less explicitly
based upon a theory of justice which takes into account a common under-
standing of fairness.

This framework is different from that in which a politics of pity functions
in at least three essential respects. First, a city orientated towards justice
does not focus on the opposition between the fortunate and the unfortu-
nate, but on the distinction between the *great* and the *small*. The disputes
it is called upon to settle concern precisely whether the ranking of people
in terms of size and worth is just. A satisfactory answer to this question first
and foremost requires recourse to a convention of equivalence.

A second difference is essential. In the model directed towards justice, the
possession of greatness, the fact of being someone great or someone of less
account, is not a status definitively attached to someone. People are qual-
ified by their greatness or smallness, but whether or not one is great or small
is not a *condition*. The 'great' and the 'small' do not form distinct groups
according to their size. Thus, formally at least, there are no *classes* of the
'great' and 'small'. In the terms of a politics of pity, however, good fortune
and misfortune are conditions that define separate groups. The politics of
pity regards the unfortunate together *en masse*, even if, as we shall see, it is
necessary to single out particular misfortunes from the mass in order to
inspire pity.

Finally, following from the fact that qualities of greatness and smallness
are not attached to persons, a politics of justice must settle disputes by
bringing the convention of equivalence to bear in a *test*. It is only at the
outcome of the test, in the course of which the conflicting parties are
induced to cite the objects and aims of a shared world, that their state of
'greatness' is revealed. It is because their claims are confronted with reality
that the order brought to light by the test (which a different test could chal-
lenge) can be qualified as *just*. However, according to this logic what
matters is not whether someone 'small' is fortunate or unfortunate. They
have what they deserve whatever the state of their fortune. Even if fair mag-
istrates evince a concern for mitigating the harshness of the ranking
brought to light by the trial, they are not moved by considerations of mis-
fortune so much as by their taking into account *movements of greatness*
(*transports de grandeur*)[7] which have affected the results of the trial, either
positively or negatively, through the unequal distribution of privileges and
handicaps. In equity it is always the point of view of justice that ultimately
prevails.

What is thought to be important in a politics of pity is the opposite of
this. A politics of pity does not ask whether the misery of the unfortunate

is justified. We will see that in some of its formulations, and specifically when the unfortunate is regarded as a *victim*, this politics may compromise with justice and consequently pose the question of justification – but it always does so in order to give a negative answer; the question remains rhetorical and is not tested. Besides, we know intuitively how indecent and scandalous it would be to raise this question when faced with what are often incredible displays of suffering. Who, for example, would dream of saying that the inhabitants of a country ravaged by famine have what they deserve? For a politics of pity, the urgency of the action needing to be taken to bring an end to the suffering invoked always prevails over considerations of justice. From such a perspective it is only in a world from which suffering has been banished that justice could enforce its rights.

1.2 Compassion and pity

The development of a politics of pity thus assumes two classes which are not unequal by reference to merit, as in the problematic of justice, but solely by reference to luck. However, there must be sufficient contact between these two classes for those who are fortunate to be able to observe, either directly or indirectly, the misery of the unfortunate, while at the same time the classes must be sufficiently distant or separate for their experiences and actions to remain clearly distinct. None the less, Hannah Arendt notes that the spectacle of misery does not necessarily lead to a politics of pity. Two scenarios appear.

The misery of the unfortunate may simply be ignored and thus inspire no pity. Hannah Arendt takes the example of the Founding Fathers of the American Revolution who are upset by slavery insofar as it conflicts with the demands of liberty but in whom one looks in vain for a word of pity for the condition of about one quarter of the American population existing under the yoke of necessity, absolute want and violence. In this, as in many other historical situations, the fortunate and unfortunate can live in the same country without the former seeing the latter, either as the result of a kind of physical blindness arising from a subtle separation of the spaces within which they each move, that is of their social networks, or, and the two phenomena are commonly found mixed together, due to a moral blindness, when the discrepancy between their respective conditions creates a gulf that prevents the class of 'those who do not suffer' from forming an idea of the suffering of the unfortunate.

There is however another possibility that is particularly relevant for our purposes. Those who are more fortunate may show a benevolent concern for the unfortunate without this being describable as a *politics*. We follow

Hannah Arendt again when she claims that until the eighteenth century 'compassion operated outside the political realm and frequently outside the established hierarchy of the Church' (pp. 70–1).

To show how, within the framework of Western traditions and especially in early Christianity, a benevolent concern for the suffering of others may manifest itself outside the political dimension, Hannah Arendt takes up the contrast between *compassion* and *pity* (pp. 85–95). Her description of compassion, which is based on an analysis of two works of fiction, *Billy Budd* by Melville and *The Grand Inquisitor* by Dostoyevsky, emphasises those features which bring out an analysis of the notion of Christian love or Agape, especially in its contrast with justice.[8] For Arendt the principal characteristic of compassion is that it is directed towards particular individuals, particular suffering beings, without seeking to develop any 'capacity for generalisation'. It possesses thereby a *practical* character in the sense that it can only be actualised in particular situations in which those who do not suffer meet and come face to face with those who do. Face to face presence in compassion has two important consequences on which Arendt repeatedly and rightly insists. On the one hand, compared with pity compassion is not loquacious and, on the other, it shows no great interest in *emotion*. Not having to 'generalise', Arendt says, compassion is content with a 'curious muteness' in comparison with the 'eloquence' of pity. To be more precise, compassion is not so much mute as that its language 'consists in gestures and expressions of countenance rather than in words' (p. 86): 'compassion speaks only to the extent that it has to reply directly to the sheer expressionist sound and gestures through which suffering becomes audible and visible in the world' (p. 86). As a direct response to the expression of suffering, compassion is not 'talkative and argumentative' (p. 86), and for this very reason emotion plays no great part in it. Perhaps we should postulate the existence of a compassionate emotion, but to the extent that the person it affects is immediately moved no place is left for its expression as such. Quite the opposite is the case with pity which generalises in order to deal with distance, and in order to generalise becomes eloquent, recognising and discovering itself as emotion and feeling.

However, as Hannah Arendt's analysis again suggests, the opposition between compassion – which is linked to presence and thereby apparently local – and pity – which generalises and integrates the dimension of distance – only works analytically if we keep in mind the position from which this opposition was arrived at. Actually, it is only from a world in which the principal mechanism of generalisation is political that compassion can appear to be something purely local. Now in its theological understanding compassion is supported by a different mechanism of generalisation which

is that of the union of the baptised (and, by extension, all human beings) in the mystical body of Christ. The *Communion of Saints* is precisely that form of union which brings the baptised together, beyond the constraints of space and time, in an 'exchange of prayers' ('*commerce de prières*') in such a way that 'everything received in holiness by each belongs somehow to all'[9] and 'what each must do and suffer is not gauged by his needs alone, but on the needs of all'[10] so that we cannot say who receives and who gives (or, in other respects, who is great and who small, what is cause and what effect, etc.) because those who 'thus act on each other' are all equally 'members of each other.'[11]

This is the theological background against which, for example, the confraternities of penitents were founded, those 'organised groups of the laity with a religious character' that Maurice Agulhon tells us 'congregated' in Provence from the sixteenth century up to the second half of the eighteenth century, and which, besides undertaking religious duties, assumed responsibility for the upkeep of the hospital (that is to say, for aid to the poor) and, in particular, for burial services for the indigent and for execution victims, requiring 'almost physical contact with the dead' which was especially dangerous in times of epidemics.[12] To start with these works were occasions for soliciting prayers from those 'privileged intercessors', the poor.[13] Maurice Agulhon suggests that the decline of these fraternities around the 1770s, which were criticised by 'reforming bishops' as well as by 'enlightened opinion', was linked with the secularisation of philanthropy and, in particular, with municipalities taking greater responsibility for public assistance. It is thus tempting to see, if not a causal relationship between the two phenomena, at least the sign of a shift in the forms of generality on which the relationship to suffering rests. The movement which led from a spiritual to a political kind of generality thus takes on an explicit concern with the dimension of *distance*. In fact, distance is a fundamental dimension of a politics which has the specific task of a *unification* which overcomes dispersion by setting up the 'durable institutions' needed to establish equivalence between spatially and temporally *local* situations.

1.3 The Good Samaritan

We can attempt to take Hannah Arendt's analysis further by considering the parable of the Good Samaritan and the use to which it has been put by contemporary jurists in founding what in French law is called the obligation to assist someone in danger.[14] The analysis of this paradigmatic situation will enable us to pose a third alternative which contrasts with both

compassion and the politics of pity and, in addition, to reflect further on the relationship between spectacle and action.

Let us note at the outset that in its concision the story of the Good Samaritan, which is a secular parable in the sense that it does not employ the metaphor of the Kingdom to come but indicates the action that must be taken in this world,[15] gives a form to the principal features of compassion. Its real starting point is *the spectacle of suffering*. Three passers-by travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho *see*, one after the other, an unfortunate who has been left half-dead by robbers. The first two carry on regardless. The third 'exercises charity' towards him, dresses his wounds, gives him oil and wine, carries him on his horse to an inn and, the following day, provides the innkeeper with money for his care until the traveller's return. In this model, fortunate and unfortunate travellers find themselves face to face so that what is within the range of eyesight is also within reach of the hand. It is precisely this conjunction of the possibility of knowing and the possibility of acting that defines a *situation* characterised by the fact that it offers the possibility of being involved, of a *commitment*. This can be rejected, obviously, but only, as is shown by the example of the first two travellers, by looking the other way and quickly putting a distance between oneself and the sufferer. That is why, as Paul Ricoeur notes, the neighbour here belongs to 'the order of narration' as a 'chain of *events*': the parable converts 'the story told into a paradigm of action'.[16]

The second relevant feature is the absence of speech. Neither the indifferent passers-by nor the one who provides aid express the unfortunate's misery in words, nor do they seek to justify themselves. In short, we know nothing, or next to nothing, about the emotions and sentiments of the traveller who interrupts his journey. The 'pity' he feels at the sight of the unfortunate is immediately transformed into 'charity', that is to say into 'objective disposition to relieve the distress of others' which incorporates 'the sentiment which prompts the act of pity'.[17] The ready availability of action does not free a space between seeing and acting within which an emotion or feeling could be displayed and expressed as such. The action, however, is described in detail. Its characteristic feature is its practicability. The person who practices charity does not accomplish the impossible. He sacrifices time, goods and money, but it is a limited sacrifice. The task that presents itself to him is not insuperable; he arrives on the scene after the struggle has taken place, for example, and he is not required to put his own life at risk by confronting the robbers.

Finally, coming upon the unfortunate one after the other, each of the passers-by comes to a decision as if they were on their own in considering the suffering. Significantly, this excludes a discussion of where the obliga-

tion lies for providing assistance. This last, and as we have seen, central feature of compassion, charity, is not put into action in wholly general terms but is inscribed in particular relationships between particular individuals: passers-by without problems and an unfortunate whose suffering manifests itself locally.

It should be noted that this kind of description of the form of compassionate relationships is realistic. It is realistic first of all because it focuses on the situation with its inherent constraints and on the ends with which individuals must come to terms if they are to commit themselves. It is also realistic because it places itself at the level of action, and specifically of an action directed towards the relief of the unfortunate's suffering which must consider both its practicability (taking into account the constraints on the person providing help) and effectiveness (the likelihood of effectively changing the condition of the suffering individual). Finally, it is realistic because it chimes with common experience. So, for example, the survey conducted by Kristen Monroe comparing a sample of non-Jewish people who helped Jews during the Second World War (identified and certified by Yad Vashem) with a control group, shows that explanations in terms of interests (linked, for example, to 'socio-cultural factors' or even 'psychical gratifications'), or in terms of political or religious affiliations, cannot account for the actions of those giving help (in whom only the cognitive framework, including a high sense of shared humanity, is specific).[18] At the same time the survey shows that those interviewed are usually themselves unable to attribute general motives to their action and they account for this by invoking a necessity inherent in the situation in which they found themselves involved without having wished to be, a situation which brought them into contact with individuals being hunted.[19]

1.4 The community bond

To elucidate the story of the Good Samaritan, however, it is not enough to oppose particularity to generality. Nor, it follows, can this opposition fully account for the structure within which compassion is inserted. If the various actors are all equally present in their particularity, an asymmetry is introduced by the different treatment of their definite statuses. The three passers-by are ascribed definite statuses which are necessary to the dynamic of the story because, as Jean Zumstein has shown, there is a tension between the expectations these statuses give rise to and the paradoxical outcome of the story.[20] The first two, a priest and a Levite, 'are defined by their social position'.[21] Being connected with the temple they occupy the summit of the religious hierarchy and it is precisely in order to avoid the

ritual pollution involved in touching a body, and therefore in obedience to the law, that they pass on by. In contrast, as an enemy of the Jews the Samaritan represents the other pole of the moral and religious hierarchy, so that to the question posed by legal experts concerning the identity of one's neighbour, the story offers, as Mazamisa notes,[22] two answers depending on whether one cites the relationship of the Samaritan to the unfortunate – the unfortunate is the Samaritan's neighbour – or the relationship of the legal expert to the Samaritan – the Samaritan is the legal expert's neighbour (in conformity with the New Testament injunction to 'love your enemy').[23]

However, in contrast to the passers-by, the unfortunate has no definite status. Posited as a particular being, his role can none the less be filled by anyone. This lack of status cannot be attributed simply to a stylistic constraint that, out of concern for brevity, omits 'any description of the traveller fallen among thieves' as a 'secondary character', as Bultmann suggests.[24] The absence of status plays an active role in the story. Actually it makes possible a position in relation to suffering which does not entail any conventional, customary or contractual obligations. Thus, the paradoxical outcome rests on the unfortunate's lack of a definite status. And, in conformity with the structure of the parabolic statement, this outcome is paradoxical in the sense that the direction in which charity is exercised is not orientated by prior conventions. Compassion is thereby inscribed within a framework that is reducible neither to the universality of overarching law (to which Michael Walzer opposes a reiterative universality which can recognise the particular[25]), nor to a narrow communitarianism in which difference becomes endogenous.

If compassionate acts are distinguished from a politics of pity by their local and practical character, both of these possibilities together are opposed to a third and certainly more widespread alternative in which the relationship to the suffering of a third party is immediately identified as a function of the nature of pre-existing bonds connecting the unfortunate to the person who is aware of his misfortune. As in the well-documented case of systems of vengeance[26] and of relationships of honour in Mediterranean societies in particular,[27] such bonds enable obligations to assist to be ranked according to the status of the unfortunate and whether or not the offender belongs to the group.[28] Obligations depend in the first place on one's position within a kinship system which provides an answer to the question of who is responsible for helping someone. But by the same principle unfortunates are first of all divided into friends and enemies towards whom charity is far from being obligatory. In this instance, when confronted with the spectacle of suffering the moral attitude is not neces-

sarily governed by the requirement to end it. One may come across an enemy who is suffering and do nothing to help him and nor yet hurry on to put a distance between this sufferer and oneself. The spectator may satisfy his legitimate desire for vengeance by gazing on the unfortunate's suffering and rejoicing in it, as when defeated enemies are tortured or simply put on show.

1.5 The question of commitment

This figure, that for convenience we will call *communitarian*, however different from compassion it may be, none the less shares with compassion a property which distinguishes both of them from a politics of pity. What they have in common is the reduction of the question of *commitment* which, while giving rise to a casuistry is none the less not posed in an unsettling, paradoxical or insoluble manner. We have seen that by bringing together particular individuals in a face-to-face situation compassion fills the space between sight and gesture, between knowledge and action, leaving only the alternative of flight or help, despite the indeterminate nature of the unfortunate who is *no matter who*. In a communitarian figure the unfortunate is immediately qualified in some way; by definition he is never just anyone. But because the properties which define him are *relational* in the sense that they establish his position in a structure, they also define, as we have seen, conventional courses of action which limit uncertainty about who must give assistance and the means to be used. Pre-existing conventions establish a precommitment that only has to be actualised when needed.

It is then only when suffering is considered from the standpoint of a politics of pity that the question of commitment appears as a problem. The reason for this is that a *politics* of *pity* must meet a double requirement. As a *politics* it aspires to generality. Its role is to detach itself from the local and so from those necessarily local situations in which events provoking compassion may arise. To do this politics may rely upon techniques for establishing equivalences, and on statistical techniques in particular. But in its reference to *pity* it cannot wholly free itself from the particular case. Pity is not inspired by generalities. So, for example, a picture of absolute poverty defined by means of quantitative indicators based upon existing conventions of equivalence may find its place in a macroeconomic treatise and may also help define a politics.[29] It will not, however, inspire the sentiments which are indispensable for a politics of pity. To arouse pity, suffering and wretched bodies must be conveyed in such a way as to affect the sensibility of those more fortunate. Clifford Orwin recalls that for Kant,

pity possessed, amongst other things, the weakness of a lack of propor-
tion: a suffering child fills our heart with sadness, but we greet the news of
a terrible battle with indifference.[30]

However, these particular cases must be treated in a paradoxical manner.
On the one hand, their singularity must be projected in such a way that
suffering is made concrete. The unfortunate, or rather, every unfortunate,
must therefore be conveyed as if they were there in person; as if one could
touch their wounds and hear their cries. But going into details always runs
the risk of collapsing the demonstration into the local. Now a politics of
pity is not just concerned with one unfortunate and a particular situation.
To be a politics it must convey at the same time a plurality of situations of
misfortune, to constitute a kind of procession or imaginary *demonstration*
of unfortunates brought together on the basis of both their singularity and
what they have in common. The unfortunates conveyed in this way defi-
nitely must not be characterised in preferential terms. They are neither
friends nor enemies. This is necessary in order to avoid the pitfall of the
communitarian figure. They therefore must be hyper-singularised through
an accumulation of the details of suffering and, at the same time, under-
qualified: it is he, but it could be someone else; it is that child there who
makes us cry, but any other child could have done the same. Around each
unfortunate brought forward crowds a host of replacements. The sufferings
made manifest and touching through the accumulation of details must also
be able to merge into a unified representation. Although singular, they are
none the less *exemplary*.

The particular problem that a politics of pity must confront thus con-
cerns this paradoxical treatment of *distance*. To avoid the local such a pol-
itics must bring together particular situations and thereby convey them,
that is to say cross a distance, while retaining as far as possible the qualities
conferred on them by a face to face encounter. This is not a new problem.
In fact the hypothesis of this book is that the spectacle of suffering, incon-
gruous when viewed at a *distance* by people who do not suffer, and the
unease that this spectacle infallibly provokes – so evident today when eating
our evening meal we see famished or massacred bodies paraded before our
eyes in our home – is not a technical consequence of modern means of
communication, even if the power and expansion of the media have
brought misery into the intimacy of fortunate households with unprece-
dented efficiency. Similarly, the problems posed to the spectator (should he
continue his meal, as if it was nothing?) are not, and this will be the argu-
ment developed in part I, absolutely new. They emerged at the same time
that pity was introduced into politics. In fact, for reasons we will put for-
ward, it is inherent in a politics of pity to deal with suffering from the stand-

point of distance since it must rely upon the massification of a collection of unfortunates who are not there in person. For when they come together in person to invade the space of those more fortunate than they and with the desire to mix with them, to live in the same places and to share the same objects, then they no longer appear as unfortunates and, as Hannah Arendt says, are transformed into '*les enragés*'.[31] But then we leave the framework of a politics of pity. For what is in question, in the crisis, is precisely the division and separation of the unfortunate and the fortunate without which a politics of pity cannot be developed.

However, the distant spectator is not exempt from all moral obligation on the grounds that the unfortunate is not present. It is precisely to his moral sense that the demonstration usually appeals. For without morality there is no pity. But how can we specify and fulfill this paradoxical obligation which appears immediately obvious and at the same time profoundly obscure? We will rapidly examine some of the ways in which this problem has been posed in recent work which seeks to clarify the obligation to help and to extend it to people far away.

1.6 Distance and action

The Good Samaritan's charitable action may be seen to be good without it being treated as an obligation and so without it being liable to sanction when there is a failure to perform it. To make it into an obligation (the duty to give assistance and the liability to sanction in the absence of doing so, as in French law for example, when one fails to come to the assistance of someone in danger) the action of causing suffering and the action of giving assistance, as John Harris emphasises,[32] would have to be placed within the same framework (a view which is directed against the non-consequentialist thesis defended by libertarians and leaning on a Lockean theory of rights which separates the right to defend one's own life when it is threatened by others from the right to receive assistance from others when one's life is in danger).[33]

The obligation to give assistance to someone who is suffering may be based on a moral responsibility derived from a causal responsibility. The causal responsibility may itself be active or passive, through perpetuation or omission. If then moral responsibility belongs first and foremost to the person who caused the suffering, it can also be imputed to the person who knew about it but did nothing to prevent it. However, it is more difficult to determine where responsibility lies in cases of omission than in cases of perpetuation since, as Susan James notes when discussing the arguments of John Harris, candidates for passive responsibility are generally more

numerous and indefinite than candidates for active responsibility.[34] According to A. Honoré, three instances of omission can be put forward.[35] Responsibility can derive from prior commitments which may be:

(1) contractual – such as, for example, the professional commitments of a doctor who fails to help an injured person;
(2) natural – like family commitments, which are close to the communitarian relationship. In both of these cases the candidate for responsibility is in the first instance someone 'specialised', that is to say someone one would expect to do something. But, there are,
(3) other cases, of particular interest to us, where responsibility is sought among persons who are not specialised, either because the person usually responsible has not done anything or could not do anything (as when a disabled father watches his child drown for example), or because there is no one specialised and responsibility can then fall on anyone. As the jurisprudence of accusations of non-intervention shows,[36] judgements may take into account at least four dimensions as excuses which can be invoked by the accused: (1) the unintentional or 'non deliberate' character of the omission; (2) the weighing of the duty to intervene against respect for the other person's autonomy, especially in cases of suicide where the unfortunate voluntarily inflicts suffering on himself; (3) the material impossibility of giving help; and finally (4) the importance of the sacrifice which would have to be made in giving help.

The intentional or unintentional character of omission depends on the information available to the potential helper. This information bears on at least two different points: on the reality of the unfortunate's suffering and so on the urgency of the help needed, and on the possibility of help being provided by others and, in particular, on the existence of potential specialised responsible individuals whose obligation would be assured by a precommitment. This latter consideration is also involved in the second kind of excuse, since respect for the autonomy of the unfortunate is a more weighty consideration for an individual without precommitments than it is for a precommitted helper. Finally the material possibility of action is more likely to be weighed against the importance of the sacrifice demanded if the potential helper is not specialised. Jurisprudence here follows and reveals common sense. While from a contractual helper (a fireman for example), or from a natural helper (a father for example), an unlimited sacrifice may be expected, even to the point of a sacrifice of life, in the case of a helper without precommitments the expected, or normal, sacrifice, which is never

nothing (be it only the loss of time), is always limited. When the obligation is juridically sanctioned, the sacrifice deemed normal usually concerns material goods, the property of the potential helper (thus, damage done to a new car may be weighed against the urgency of using it on poor roads to carry an injured person to hospital), but it does not involve risk to his own life or even his health. The fact of putting one's own life or health at risk is precisely what separates normal obligation, which can be expected of everyone, from heroism, which distinguishes only some people. A similar principle, while taking into account the common good rather than the helper's interests, is used to give a general moral foundation to the duty to give assistance by proposing, like Peter Singer for example in the article cited above, the rule that the sacrifice agreed to must be as important as possible without thereby sacrificing something else of comparable moral importance, that is to say, without failing in another duty and, say, depriving one's children of bread in order to feed a starving tramp. The example chosen by Singer, which is in some ways even less problematic than that of the Good Samaritan, is that of a man passing a shallow sea, with no one else nearby, who sees a child drowning and jumps into the water to help him, thereby running the risk of spoiling his new suit.

However, we cannot follow Peter Singer when he claims that nearness or distance make no moral difference and when he undertakes to extend his account to include giving aid to children dying of hunger in Bengal under the same obligation. Nor, to take another example, can we follow Gerard Elfstrom when, in relation to the problem of external intervention in response to a violation of human rights, he seeks to derive rules of international relations directly from interpersonal interactions on the grounds that moral constraints are in principle universal.[37] In fact, while there is an undeniable similarity between the vocabulary of sentiment, intention or action used to describe and judge moral relationships between persons within domestic units (friendship, squabbles, honour, duplicity, help, etc.) on the one hand and moral relationships between States on the other, this similarity assumes that each of the latter entities is treated as a *collective person* with its own will ('France does not accept that . . .'), or with a will delegated to a representative speaking in its name.[38] Now one of the most striking effects of the constitution of collective persons is precisely a reduction of the effect of size (does the telephone interaction between Kennedy and Kruschev during the Cuban missile crisis belong to the macro or micro order?) and, correlatively, a reduction of the dimension of distance. One of the dimensions of the collective person, or of its representative, is in fact action at a distance. It is this very attribute which describes in the most concise and striking fashion the intuitive content of the idea of *power*. It

follows that one cannot tacitly slide from the treatment of distance in the description of relationships between States to the treatment of distance in the description of the way in which citizens of a State regard events which take place far away and which do not directly concern them.

In the case of ordinary persons, the question of distance is only raised when, as in Peter Singer's example, the sufferings of the unfortunate are visible, far away, to an informed spectator who cannot act directly. The disjunction between the possibilities of information and possibilities of action, and increasing uncertainty concerning the action needed, make the assimilation of not killing and not letting die defended by Peter Singer somewhat disturbing,[39] and provide stronger support to arguments which rank the obligation to help in accordance with a principle of distance (be concerned with those close to you first of all). Arguments in favour of ranking moral obligations to give aid according to the distance involved, arguments which are the legacy of debates on the extreme situations of famine within the natural law tradition which paved the way to a compromise between the contradictory demands of property rights and the right to life or survival,[40] can easily be used to reduce this moral obligation to one of communal solidarity.

How is a new situation created by distance? We will seek to describe this situation quickly by taking up again the dimensions involved in judgements of the obligation to give assistance already referred to. One effect of distance is surely that moral responsibility through omission becomes more uncertain and therefore difficult to establish when the causal chain is lengthened. The person who sees from afar is unaware of other people receiving the news, how near they are relative to the case, their readiness to act and whether or not they have precommitments. Each is thereby uncertain as to the existence of a ranked series of persons under an obligation to act to different degrees, as to their possible position in this series, and as to the failure to act of possible helpers higher up in the series for whom they would have to become substitutes.

Even when the unfortunate is strongly singled out, as for example in the case given by Susan James of a televised appeal for help on behalf of a young homeless Laotian girl dying of hunger, the distant spectator does not know whether others, and how many, will respond to the appeal.

When we examine the figure of *accusation* we will see that one way of consolidating distant responsibility consists in reinforcing the connection through omission (everyone has allowed something to happen, from the nearest to the most distant spectator) with a connection through perpetuation: the most distant spectator continues to draw a personal or collective profit from the suffering of the unfortunate to the extent that he is a

member of a nation whose collective wealth is the result of the exploitation of poor nations (the argument is discussed in Singer).[41] The person who does nothing and fails to act is not only 'causally' responsible for an evil he could have prevented (which is what John Harris calls 'the marxist conception of violence' whose origin he traces back to Plutarch), but he does nothing because he has an interest in averting his gaze. The distant and passive spectator may actually be called an active accomplice of those who directly caused the sufferings of the unfortunate if the causal chain is extended to him. But for this complex figure to hold up it is necessary to construct a conception of responsibility through objective solidarity independent of the actor's intentions which, as we will see, presupposes a weighty systematic or structural armature which is itself hard to defend against criticism.

1.7 Paying and speaking

It is action above all that is the problem. The spectacle of the unfortunate being conveyed to the witness, the action taken by the witness must in turn be conveyed to the unfortunate. But the instruments which can convey a representation and those which can convey an action are not the same. Those who attempt to ground the obligation to provide aid to those suffering far away on the basis of face-to-face situations use examples in which only two forms of action are envisaged: paying and speaking. No one ever suggests, for example, that the spectator should drop everything and take himself to the unfortunate's side.

Both possibilities presuppose the existence of a chain of intermediaries between the spectator and the unfortunate. Payment at a distance cannot be made directly as to someone who offers his suffering to the gaze of every passer-by, as is the case with the beggar encountered in the street. To send a sum of money not only requires a banking system but also the existence of an institution – a State or supra-State institution or a 'non-governmental' humanitarian organisation – which can both receive the money and *forward* it to the unfortunate, as it is usually said, normally after having converted it into goods. Apart from the fact that such a medium may simply not exist, its action may be hampered or the way in which it uses the funds it receives may be challenged.

In the case of speech, the chain of intermediaries is formed in the first place by a series of interlocutors. But this is not enough, because it is not just a matter of conveying a *message* to the unfortunate (as it would be, for example, if all that was needed to help him was to send him 'the good word'). For speech to reduce the unfortunate's suffering, and for it to be

regarded thereby as a form of action, in the sense that 'speaking is acting', a different kind of instrument is needed: *public opinion* engaging directly with political institutions. It is insofar as speakers are also citizens of a republic that they can express an opinion through elections or revolts and thus put pressure on governments reputedly inclined to intervene on behalf of the unfortunate, by laws or even by force, when those whose suffering is conveyed from afar are of another nation. To take the claim that speech is *effective* seriously, that is to say speech which, whatever the status of the person uttering it and the place or form of its expression, can be causally connected to the actions of others whose effect is felt *at a distance,* the first being in some sense the *authors* of the actions taken by *actors* to borrow the Hobbesian metaphor, we need the support of the complicated political construction of the City.

With regard to our problem, paying and speaking offer different advantages and drawbacks. The principal advantage of paying is that it is easier to see it as an *action* and, secondly, it makes the sacrifice made to benefit the unfortunate clearer and more easily calculable. But this quasi-action has two major drawbacks. On the one hand, it has the disadvantage of being realised by means of a general equivalent which, as such, obliterates the singularity of both the donor and the recipient. In sending a cheque, nothing remains of the singular suffering of a particular unfortunate. But we have seen that in one form or another the memory of the singularity of the person who suffers is indispensable to the existence and expression of pity. Similarly, the *commitment* of the donor is somehow hidden by the impersonal character of a medium which could be used for any other kind of purpose – buying a cooker or going on holiday for instance – so that giving money is often accused of being a 'way out', of being precisely a way to rid oneself of the burden of guilt, and of obligation itself, cheaply and without genuine involvement in the situation of the unfortunate's suffering. The money goes far away; but the donor does not follow it. The bond created between the donor and the unfortunate is therefore minimal and abstract (which is why organisations which collect money for children in the Third World, or in countries at war, often endeavour to organise a reciprocal arrangement, such as letters sent by the children to the donor).

On the other hand, a reproach just as often levelled against giving money is that it is an *individual* act. In fact, anyone can take this action regardless of whether there are other donors or who they are. By itself, if it is not accompanied by words, it is therefore insufficient for drawing that line in the collectivity which enables us to pick out what we call a *group*. Donations are aggregated, but not the donors. But a *politics of pity*, like any other politics, cannot do without the constitution of groups.

   Compared with paying, the principal drawback of speech is that it seems to be detached from action and, without further clarification does not reveal what it costs. It is not enough by itself to reveal the existence and significance of the sacrifice. This is what is meant when it is denounced as 'costing nothing' or when we say ironically that it is 'just words'. For the sacrifice to be clearly apparent speech must come up against opposition and thereby introduce an uncertainty, a risk, which enables it to be described as 'courageous'. The paradox here is that it is precisely in regimes where speech or public opinion is the major means of orchestration, and so in regimes in which it is supposed to be most effective, that is in democratic regimes, that the exercise of speech appears to be the least costly and most distant from the idea of sacrifice. In any event it remains the case, and this is a considerable advantage for our purpose, that because it is communicated from one person to another and is expressed in public in front of others, speech constitutes the principal means for the manifestation and marking out of groups, as in the case of petitions, for example, which objectify units cut out from the continuum of the collectivity. It is by this means therefore that the politics of pity can develop, justifying the importance we accord it in the rest of this book.

   We will now focus on the way in which the spectator can point towards action by putting himself in the position of having to report what he has seen and on the analysis of the constraints he must take into account in order to produce an acceptable report. This analysis requires us to return to the moment when the ideal of the public sphere as the transparent site of a generalised conversation was introduced into politics almost concomitantly with the introduction of the demand for pity. This will involve in particular a description of the tension produced by the conjunction of these two demands. We will then examine arrangements which can lessen this constraint.