Complex Humanitarian Emergencies: Moral Quandaries

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The expression "complex emergency," formulated in the early 1990s in the United Nations to characterize vast humanitarian crises such as those in Rwanda and Bosnia, has already passed into common parlance among NGOs and in the media.[1] The growth in number and scope of such crises in the post-Cold-War era has put unprecedented pressure on humanitarian agencies. It has also generated bewilderment among many in the international community regarding the allocation of responsibility and the costs to be borne in responding to human rights violations and desperate survival needs. Part of the bewilderment stems from a failure to sort out and examine the different factual and moral strands of expressions such as "complex emergency" and "humanitarian."

As we address the question of how to respond to the growing number of complex humanitarian emergencies worldwide, it is important, therefore, to seek greater understanding of the terms themselves. What exactly do they mean? In what sense are such collective calamities complex? How do they differ, once labeled emergencies, from equally desperate long-term human predicaments, if at all? And how is the expression "complex emergency" changed, if at all, by speaking, as is often done, of complex humanitarian emergencies? The following references to "complex emergency" are representative of current usage:

> * The world's response to mass migration is most prompt and adequate when refugees cross international borders and, therefore, are protected by international legal conventions. In the,case of more complex emergencies, involving civil war, famine, non-functioning governments, and mass internal displacement, the world has been slower to respond [1].
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> * Contemporary refugee crises tend to be complex emergencies that combine political instability, ethnic tensions, armed conflict, economic collapse, and the disintegration of civil society [2].

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1. The expression also has a medical meaning, separate from the one here discussed, having to do with emergency medical services of a complex nature.

* Most of the latest missions have been what the UN calls "complex emergencies," in which the UN must end a war, cure a famine, resettle refugees, work with relief agencies, even rebuild whole nations [3].

* For the purposes of this document, a "complex emergency" is a humanitarian crisis which may involve armed conflict and that may be exacerbated by natural disasters. It is a situation in which prevailing conditions threaten the lives of a portion of the affected population who, for a variety of reasons, are unable to obtain the minimum subsistence requirements and are dependent on external humanitarian assistance for survival [4].

* Rwanda is the latest of what United Nations and government officials call "complex emergencies," a lethal combination of starvation, economic collapse, civil strife and disintegrating political authority [5].

These references to "complex emergency" overlap only in part. Most, but not all, mention the plight of refugees, armed conflict, starvation, and societal collapse, whether economic or political or both. Other elements mentioned include the role of relief agencies or of humanitarian assistance, ethnic tensions, and possible natural disasters. All concern, implicitly or explicitly, vast threats to human survival.

Complex Humanitarian Emergency: The Need to Avoid Euphemism

The expression "complex emergency," used in these ways, is more than a label for such crises. It offers a starting point from which to inquire into their causes and possible remedies. And from an immediate practical point of view, the expression offers neutral, non-accusatory language that may facilitate negotiations with obstructionist governments or warring parties for safe passage or safe havens. Like many similar abstractions, however, "complex emergency" can also function as a euphemism that makes it possible for outsiders to make dispassionate references to unspeakable forms of inhumanity and to human suffering so stark as to be almost unbearable, if truly perceived.

The constituent words "complex" and "emergency" are themselves highly abstract and multilayered, with many meanings that only partially enter into the concept of "complex emergency." When used together, the two words also take on special moral connotations that they do not otherwise possess. So long as these interlocking meanings and moral connotations are not sorted out, it is easier either to settle for the use of the concept as euphemism or to read into it unexamined moral premises and untested, undebated conclusions about responsibilities, rights, and obligations. It is worth considering each of the two constituent word in turn, therefore, along with "humanitarian," so often wedged between them, as a background to the larger debate about how moral claims should affect our responses to the crises of human survival at issue.

Complexity: Physical, Political, and Moral Aspects

Something -- a fraction, a number, a musical harmony, a machine, a sentence -- is complex if it consists of several parts that are connected or woven together.[2] A heap of stones is not complex in this sense, no matter how many stones are part of it, whereas even the simplest living organism beyond the amoeba stage is. A related meaning of the word "complex" is that of something that is difficult to disentangle or analyze, as in a complex logical problem or engineering set-up. In none of these circumstances does the word ordinarily carry any moral connotations, having to do with justice or injustice, or good and evil.

Earthquakes, floods, and other natural disasters are often extraordinarily complex, in the sense of exhibiting a number of interacting factors and in that of being difficult to disentangle; yet such disasters are not classified as "complex emergencies" unless the complexity is also of a moral nature, in that human actions are contributing to rendering the resulting crisis more severe. The civil strife in the aftermath of the earthquake in Armenia in 1988, for example, increased the suffering of the quake's victims and rendered assistance efforts more difficult. That crisis would now count as a complex emergency, unlike the aftermath of the earthquake in the Philippines in 1990 or that in Los Angeles in 1994.

This moral aspect of complexity, in complex emergencies, attaches both to causes generating the emergency and to the effort to remedy them. Human undertakings, such as political repression, civil war, or economic pressures from the outside, contribute directly to such a state of crisis, whether or not triggered by a natural disaster. When warring factions, as in Somalia, or governments, as in Sudan or Haiti, not only heighten conditions

2 The Latin "com-plexus" means "plaited together," and the words "plaited together," "interwoven," and "connected together" occur variously in dictionary definitions of "complex."

of famine, migration, and epidemics, but also interfere with the distribution of aid, confiscate supplies, and threaten the lives of relief workers, the existing emergency comes to be characterized as complex. It is an emergency, as one UN representative cautiously put it, "with complex political overtones" [6].

Such a crisis is rendered both more acute and more difficult to overcome to the extent that aid efforts become more dangerous and costly. It involves both unintended and intended causes: on the one hand naturally occurring causes of misery such as drought, famine, epidemics, and overcrowding, and, on the other hand, the purposive interference by public officials, warring groups, or foreign powers, with the effort by victims to see to their own survival and by outsiders to come to their aid.

This is not to say that there can ever be absolute demarcations between human and non-human causes of emergencies. Famines typically result from mismanagement and maldistribution; earthquakes have very different effects in crowded regions than in deserts. But the difference to which the term 'complex' speaks, in this context, is between emergencies where governments or warring factions do and do not contribute directly to societal collapse, do and do not actively threaten the survival of populations.

The moral aspects of such uses of the word "complex," then, have to do with human activities held to be rightful or wrongful, admirable or reprehensible, just or unjust. Such judgments are unavoidable when the survival of populations is at issue. But the very complexity of the causes of the emergencies makes the attribution of responsibility complex as well. As a result, moral accusations are often levied at adversaries by the contestants on each side of the related conflicts, as well as at outsiders.

The eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume wrote of conditions in which survival is threatened on a large scale as ones in which justice itself may be out of reach [7]. He pointed to both natural and human causes of such a state of affairs. Justice can be expected, first of all, only in an intermediate range with respect to both natural scarcity and human failures. If there is such scarcity that human survival is impossible, then justice is to no avail. Conversely, if there is utter abundance of all that human beings might need, justice is unnecessary. Secondly, justice is only within reach and needed when human beings are neither so demoniacally evil and shortsightedly blind to future consequences that appeals to justice are to no avail, nor so uniformly generous, altruistic, kind, foresightful, that problems or disputes would never arise.

When Hume wrote, there would have been no way for him to conceive of humanly inflicted suffering on the massive scale that we now witness. The world's population had not yet reached one billion. The armaments of the time could inflict but a fraction of the casualties of contemporary wars. And reports of threats to survival in distant lands made their way slowly, if at all, to the European public. But if Hume could have fore seen a present-day complex emergency such as that in Rwanda in 1994, he might have seen it as an example of conditions in which any sort of justice is threatened because of the interweaving of human and natural forces at their most lethal: where political strife amounting to genocide, along with hunger, lack of water, epidemics, and agricultural failure, threaten millions of women, children, and men, in addition to those killed from the outset, and also pose extraordinary risks for those attempting humanitarian assistance.

As Judith Shklar points out, however, in The Faces of Injustice, the distinction between humanly inflicted injustices and naturally occurring misfortunes such as those from earthquakes comes more easily for outsiders than for the victims themselves:

> [T]he difference between misfortune and injustice frequently involves our willingness and our capacity to act or not to act on behalf of the victims, to blame or to absolve, to help, mitigate, and compensate, or just to turn away [8].

The concept of a complex emergency was not available as recently as 1990, when Shklar wrote. But it, too, is peculiarly a concept coined from the perspective of outsiders. To be in the midst of calamities such as those experienced by victims of such emergencies is to be beset in such ways that distinctions between human and non human causes, moral and non-moral factors, are of little or no avail.

Emergency: To Whom and For Whom?

An emergency is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as a "juncture that arises or turns up; especially a state of things unexpectedly arising and urgently demanding immediate action"; or by the American Heritage Dictionary as a situation "of great danger that develops suddenly and unexpectedly." Yet the vast and many-dimensional threats to human survival labeled as "complex emergencies" do not altogether fit these

dictionary definitions of emergencies. A landslide, an earthquake, a flood may come about in such a sudden and unexpected way; but the crisis in Rwanda, though it ignited with sudden force, was not unexpected; and the famine resulting from civil war in Somalia was less and less unexpected as the months wore on. Such situations are, however, emergencies in that they are "urgently demanding action." They are viewed, therefore, as emergencies in a sense that is primarily moral or valuational: namely a situation so serious as to have priority over others. Just as emergency vehicles have priority on the road and other cars must pull to the side and let them pass, so the claim for complex emergencies is that they represent such urgent human predicaments that they must receive priority over other human needs. Funds allocated elsewhere by donor agencies and nations must be reallocated, at least for the short run.

The use of the word "emergency" to indicate priority in the distribution of resources constitutes, therefore, an implicit moral claim. Unless it is seen as such, it can serve to bypass issues of weighing and comparing responses: Why, for instance, rush to the aid at one time rather than earlier or later? Why bring aid to one society and not to another in similar straits? How long should the aid continue, and at what costs to all involved? Merely labeling some crises and not others "emergencies" ought not to be dispositive with respect to where to rush assistance on an emergency basis.

Here again, as with the distinction between "complex" and other emergencies, the distinction between complex crises that count and do not count as emergencies is one made from the perspective of outsiders who must decide how and when to try to be of help, rather than from that of the victims themselves, for whom any threat to life is an emergency, even if no outsider learns of their predicament or comes to their help. Many instances of vast human suffering have gone largely unnoticed by those who might have come to the rescue, or, to the extent noticed and documented, have elicited little outside response. Idi Amin's reign of terror in Uganda in the 1970s, in which more than 300,000 persons were killed, would have constituted, in today's terms, a "complex emergency." But would it have been granted priority at the time by the international community? And how might such an expression have applied to the Nazi Holocaust? Or to the Chinese famine of 1959-1961, now estimated to have taken between 20 and 40 million lives? Too often, what is at stake is not so much the levels of human suffering as whether or not the outside world becomes aware of this suffering and chooses to make an issue of it.

One must distinguish, then, between collective human emergencies as experienced from within and from without. From within, they count as such whether or not aid is available -- and indeed, as mentioned above, whether or not the suffering is inflicted on purpose by human forces or not. For victims, likewise, the question of whether their suffering is increased because of embargoes, sanctions, or other forms of economic warfare imposed by outside governments is also harder to assess than for outsiders. The more ruthless the regime at the receiving end of such measures, the more likely it is to expose its own people to the worst hardships resulting from them, and thus to contribute to what outsiders view as a more severe complex emergency than would otherwise have been the case.

In the age of TV, attention can be thrown at one such emergency rather than another, depending, in part, on how difficult it is for reporters and photographers to gain entry into particular societies -- into Somalia, say, rather than the Sudan in 1993. Here again, the more ruthlessly a regime controls entry and exit, the less likely it is that adequate documentation of the emergency by outsiders will be possible.

The question, therefore, of what constitutes a "complex emergency" has both factual and moral aspects. The factual aspects concern the conditions in a particular society in crisis, and the magnitude of the needs to be met. The moral aspects have to do with how the determination is to be made that such an emergency exists, where responsibilities should be assigned, what kind of priority should be accorded the effort to seek remedies, and how long the state of emergency should occupy center stage if aid efforts do not bear fruit. Without keeping clearly in sight the moral aspects, it is likely that they will be blurred and thought, erroneously, to go with out saying so long as factual answers are found to the question. This is the more likely to happen whenever the third term, "humanitarian," with its seemingly self-evident moral import, is used in conjunction with the first two, as in "complex humanitarian emergencies" or when "humanitarian assistance" is rendered in the context of complex emergencies.

Humanitarian: An Altruist or a Scoundrel?

This word, unlike the first two, has inherent moral connotations from the outset. It evokes helpfulness, benevolence, and

humane concern going to all who are in need, without regard to person. The American Heritage Dictionary in its 1993 edition defined a humanitarian as "one devoted to the promotion of human welfare and the advancement of social reforms; a philanthropist." Such a person is admired even by many who are less altruistic. So are many forms of humanitarian assistance, even by those who regard particular undertakings so described as poorly planned or executed.

This positive view of humanitarians was less prevalent in the 19th century, however, when the word first came into common usage in English. The adjective "humanitarian" was then used, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, in a manner "nearly always contemptuous, connoting one who goes to excess in humane principles." The word conveyed deep-rooted suspicion, unlike such words as "humane," "kindly," or "good." At the time, the relation of "humanitarian" to "humane" was often seen as similar to that of today's "do-gooder" to "good." Many regarded those laying claims to humanitarianism as at best wooly-headed and sentimental about humanity at large, propounding vast schemes for human improvement even as they neglected their responsibilities to their own families and communities; and at worst, as persons using the mantle of humanitarianism and the love of humankind to cover up for every form of religious, commercial, or even criminal abuse and exploitation of others.

Charles Dickens's portrait of Mr Pecksniff, in Martin Chuzzlewit, conveys that form of exploitative hypocrisy so perfectly that "pecksniffian" has entered the English language [9]. Pecksniff, a self-proclaimed "humanitarian philosopher," expresses unctuous concern for all of humanity, calling his own daughters (and fellow parasites until he betrays them) Mercy and Charity. He is shown up for the scoundrel he is, scheming to defraud and torment his fellow humans while intoning the language of universal love.

By the 20th century, a great shift in the meaning of "humanitarian" was taking place: one that matters as we seek to understand current conflicts about when and how to respond to complex humanitarian emergencies. The term has come to be more focused and less derogatory. It is more focused, in that it concerns specifically the effort to meet fundamental human needs and to alleviate suffering, rather than all conceivable efforts to improve the human condition. And it is less derogatory, in that suspicion is no longer part of the reaction it evokes for most people. A humanitarian, rather, is seen as someone genuinely concerned to meet urgent human needs wherever they arise, without distinction as to nationality, ethnic background, or religion.

Early in our century, Dr. Albert Schweitzer helped to dramatize the personal choice that taking such humanitarianism seriously represents. His writings on religion and music had already achieved wide recognition in Europe when he went, in 1913, to Gabon, in what was then French Equatorial Africa, to build a hospital and minister to those most need in of help. In explaining how he had come to make this choice, Schweitzer wrote that he had read about "the physical miseries of the natives in the virgin forests; ...and the more I thought about it, the stranger it seemed to me that we Europeans trouble ourselves so little about the great humanitarian task which offers itself to us in far-off lands" [10]. In answer to the question "Am I my brother's keeper?" he reputedly answered: "How could I not be? I cannot escape my responsibility." He insisted that all human beings counted as brothers, in this sense, and that his obligation was to help those in need, wherever he found them, to the best of his ability. Likewise, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as quoted by Rev. Jesse Jackson in the Los Angeles Times, held that "We are all one family. We are our brothers' keepers because we are our brothers' brothers."

By the end of our century, however, and in no small part because of the complex emergencies now endangering the survival of so many, the term "humanitarian" has undergone yet another shift. It is a shift not yet noted, to the best of my knowledge, in any dictionaries. With the growth of UN aid agencies, of NGO assistance programs and so many governmental and intergovernmental efforts designated as humanitarian, the word no longer denotes only persons who work to alleviate suffering and to meet human needs, nor only their attitudes, beliefs, or actions. It now connotes, also, collective assistance programs in the name of the international community, as by the United Nations, which created a Department of Humanitarian Affairs in 1992, as well as rules of war [11]. But in the process, the term has expanded still further: it has come to concern not only the provision of aid but also the predicament of those persons and communities and populations who are in greatest need of such aid. Accordingly, when we now speak of "humanitarian crises," of "complex humanitarian emergencies," or of "international humanitarian law," we have in mind the crises for those who are afflicted as well as for those who are struggling to come to their aid.

Humanitarian Aid or Invasion?

As for the concept of "humanitarian interventions," and especially military interventions on humanitarian grounds, these have long been used even by powers having nothing but con quest in mind. Throughout history, the vast majority of invasions, proxy wars, and political coups engineered from the outside have been undertaken for self-serving often expansionist reasons quite different from any humanitarian goals invoked by their sponsors. A case in point is Hitler's claim, on September 23, 1938, that ethnic Germans and various nationalities in Czechoslovakia were being maltreated to the point that the security of more than 3,000,000 human beings was at stake [12].

By now, the term "humanitarian intervention" is more frequently invoked for what appear to be at least in part genuinely altruistic undertakings [13]. And the criteria are changing with respect to when and how it is seen as legitimate to intervene in the affairs of a state and across national frontiers to deliver humanitarian aid. But when it comes to claims that military interventions are humanitarian in nature, the original nineteenth-century suspicion of claims to humanitarianism stands as a caution against idealistic labels that risk concealing, or developing into, old-fashioned power politics.

Each of the three constituent elements of the concept of "complex humanitarian emergencies," in sum, has to be seen in the light of how it has evolved, as we consider the concept itself and the role that it now plays in debates about how best to respond to crises of human survival. Together, they point to the interlocking obstacles, and especially the human obstacles, to providing meaningful aid across national boundaries; and to the possibility that these emergencies might be not just crises in their own right, but represent, together, an unprecedented crisis for humanitarian action and intervention.

Extending the Human Circle

As the images multiply of unspeakable suffering, outsiders experience anguish in considering how best to allocate aid and to weigh the costs, even in human terms, of attempting to carry out such aid. It is anguish, too, at the contrast between the inestimable worth many are willing to grant to each life and their awareness -- made so much more immediate and overpowering by television coverage -- of the burden of suffering under which so many fellow human beings labor [14]. Most people care about the survival of at least some -- at least themselves, their family and friends, often also their fellow citizens -- more than about the rest of humanity. Yet many also take seriously the challenge posed by views such as those of Albert Schweitzer, and worry about the injustice in treating human beings differently on such grounds.

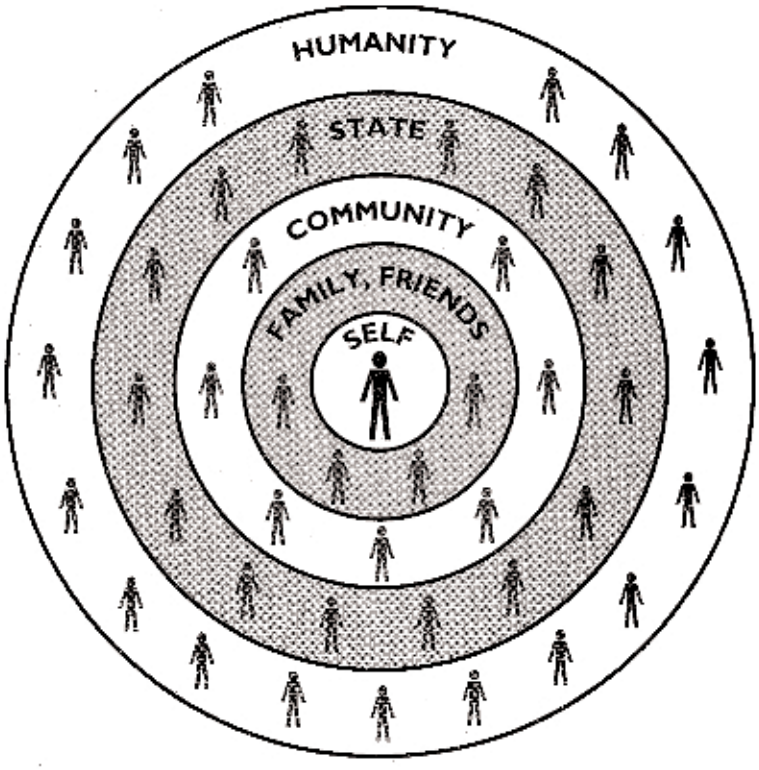

Figure 3. The metaphor of concentric circles, with the self at the center and progressively distant social relations in the outer circles, can be viewed in contrasting ways: as encouragement to expand one's connections with the larger world or as reinforcement of the notion that one's primary allegiances are owed to those closest to one's own station.

Henry Sidgwick, the British nineteenth-century thinker, found this contrast to be serious enough to threaten any coherent view of ethics. On the one hand, he was prepared, as a utilitarian, to hold as the fundamental principle of ethics "that another's greater good is to preferred to one's own lesser good." According to such a principle, any sacrifice on one's own part would be called for, so long as it could achieve a greater good for others [15]. And to those who urged that we owe more to our fellow citizens than to the rest of humanity, Sidgwick respond ed that he had never seen, nor could even "conceive, any ethical reasoning that will provide even a plausible basis" for such a view [16].

On the other hand, Sidgwick also took for granted what he called the common-sense view that our obligations to help others differ depending on the relationships in which we stand to them:

We should all agree that each of us is bound to show kindness to his parents and

spouse and children, and to other kinsmen in a less degree; and to those who have rendered services to him, and any others whom he may have admitted to his intimacy and called friends; and to neighbors and to fellow-countrymen more than others; and perhaps we may say to those of our own race more than to black or yellow men, and generally to human beings in proportion to their affinity to ourselves [17.]

A metaphor that has often been used, beginning in antiquity, to convey the conflict to which Sidgwick points, is that of concentric circles of human concern and allegiance, with the self in the center, surrounded by circles for family members, friends, community members, fellow citizens, and the rest of humanity.[3] The diagram shown in Figure 3 represents this metaphor.

The circle metaphor speaks to the necessary tensions between what is owed to insiders and outsiders of the many interlocking groups in which we all exist. The metaphor has long been used either to urge us to stretch our concern outward from the narrowest personal confines toward the needs of outsiders, strangers, and all of humanity;[4] or to stress a contrasting view: that of "my station and its duties," according to which at least some of our primary allegiances are, precisely, dependent on our situation and role in life and cannot be overridden by obligations to humanity at large.

The first view corresponds to universalist humanitarianism in many of its forms. It is expressed in statements such as those by Schweitzer and King, above. For them, saying that all are brothers is also saying that the boundaries of the different circles should count for little when it comes to helping those in need. The second view, which emphasizes these boundaries and stresses the priority of directly experienced allegiances over far-flung ones, is expressed in the second of the passages from Sidgwick quoted above.

Both the universalist and the graduated view concern human survival and security, no matter how thoroughly advocates of these views suspect opponents of parochialism or hypocrisy and, in either case, blindness to genuine human need. Most exponents of both agree at least that one ought to help others when this does not mean shortchanging persons in need to whom one has pre-existing obligations. Many agree, further, that certain prohibitions, as on killing and breaking promises and cheating, ought to hold across all the boundaries of all the circles; and that in certain acute emergencies such as that after an earthquake, the obligation to offer humanitarian aid across boundaries should supersede needs that can wait. It is when the needs of outsiders are of vast extent and prolonged duration and would constitute a considerable reallocation of scarce resources that holders of the graduated view are most likely to balk at the use of the term "emergency" to urge priority for such needs over the needs of family members or compatriots.

No matter from which of the two perspectives we intuitively view the image of the concentric circles, it is important to strive to see the importance of the other perspective and to recognize the role that both play in the conflicts over how to respond to the surge in complex humanitarian emergencies. In so doing, it matters, too, to sort out the factual and moral controversies inherent in the concept of "complex humanitarian emergencies." It is too easy, otherwise, to ignore either one: either to fail to explore the important empirical questions about how such crises arise and what forms of response are most appropriate to meet existing needs and prevent recurrences of the crises; or to ignore the genuine ambivalence many feel regarding the conflicting calls on their concern and on their sense of responsibility.

To the extent that we fail to keep such distinctions in mind, and to explore their ramifications, we risk answering too hastily the questions that today's vast humanitarian crises have raised with unprecedented starkness: Taking into account family members, friends, fellow citizens, and persons in desperate need in so many parts of the world, what loyalties should have precedence? What needs are overriding? Whose obligation is it to protect rights, such as those not to be killed or tortured, which are recognized, in principle, across all boundaries? And at what cost? ❧

3. See, for example, Hierocles, cited in A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, The Hellenistic Philosophers, Vol. I (Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 349-350. For a consideration of this view in the context of contemporary choices between universal and more localized allegiances, see Martha Nussbaum, "Patriotism or Cosmopolitanism?" Boston Review, 19, October/November 1994, pp. 3-6. Among the 29 replies to Nussbaum in that issue, several, including my own, discuss Hierocles' metaphor.

4. Sometimes the circle metaphor has also been intended to expand to include animals, as Peter Singer holds in The Expanding Circle, (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1981).This was also the intent of Albert Schweitzer, who maintained that it was not possible for anyone espousing his principle of reverence for life to draw a line between humans and animals. See Albert Schweitzer, Out of My Life and Thought, tr. A. B. Lemke (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990), p. 235: "The ethic of reverence for Life is the ethic of Love widened into universality."

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