

Jumping Into The Shallow Pond (Part One)

by Charles Whitaker

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**"But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" —
*Luke 10:29***

"And who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asked Christ (Luke 10:29).

His question presses heavily on us today. It does so because of the undeniable *fact* of our global village. That our world of jetted transportation and celled communication (where library-sized quantities of information are uploaded for common consumption as easily as they are downloaded) is one big village is a technological fact. The global village is more, though, than merely a by-product of technology. Technology simply enables banking and trade to function routinely at a global level.

Just as important is the fact that, behind the scenes and unnoticed by many, government itself has "gone global," working as the servant of dozens of professional organizations (commonly called non-governmental organizations or NGOs) which network among themselves in areas of jurisprudence, education, economics, medicine, science—and yes, even religion.

The role of NGOs as change-agents in our civilization cannot be overstated. For example, a member of the American Bar Association (say, a prominent federal judge or the Attorney General of California) feels quite comfortable today sharing ideas with his peers in a conference on international law in Singapore. These sorts of conferences, sponsored by a single NGO or by a consortium of related ones, and generally conducted in the universal language of the global village, English, take place every day. Venues include major hotels, conference centers, and of course, universities.

As another hypothetical example, consider how the leaders of the National Educational Association work congenially with their peers in an educational conference in Tokyo on the subject of ways to handle school violence. At the same time, and around the globe, police chiefs from many major cities in the world convene in Amsterdam to share experiences and to discuss techniques of handling terrorist attacks on mass transportation facilities. All these individuals, in reality members of an "international set," return home with agendas. They all lobby hard for changes in local legal, educational, or policing systems. The changes may seem local to the common man, when, in fact, they are sponsored by large international organizations, often acting behind the scenes, and accountable to no electorate whatsoever.

Perhaps the most evident example of the influence of NGO-networking is today's international hubbub over the issue of global warming. It is only a matter of time before networks of environmentalists and scientists garner the support of governments around the world (they already have the support of many) to enact laws concerning fossil fuel use. These laws will, in time, vastly change the way we common people carry out our lives. The source of these changes will not be governments *per se*, but individuals networking through NGOs.

The not-so-evident truth behind public policymaking is this: Through the operation of all sorts of international professional organizations, *a world government has already taken shape*. The everyday networking of professionals in NGOs on an international level provides a powerful engine for change

in our world in areas as diverse as childhood education to standardization of workplace sexual harassment rules. In a big way, these international networks of professionals, most of whom do not share American values at all, profoundly affect how we live our daily lives.

Yes, the global village is a fact. That is why it is so surrealistically incongruous that citizens of that village often do not know who their neighbor is. Who, indeed, is *my* neighbor? Is he the distant stranger, whose name I could not correctly utter if I read it? Or is she the villager next door, as the etymology of the word *neighbor* implies—the *neigh-* of "neighbor" meaning "nigh" or "near"? When, if ever, does a person cease to be my neighbor? Is nearness to me the controlling factor? Or is it religion? Or is it the values and the culture an individual may share with me? Is a person my neighbor simply because he or she is there, invisible, somewhere?

The Envelope

Peter Singer and Peter Unger¹ have weighed in on this issue from the viewpoint of postmodern philosophy. Both reject the "nearness test" as archaic and dangerous. To them, limiting one's definition of *neighbor* to the guy living across the street or the gal residing down the lane is parochial—narrow-minded—in the extreme. Given the realities of today's world, they see such a limited definition as the manifestation of a chauvinism so dysfunctional as to verge on a paralyzing insular xenophobia. To them, the concept of neighbor takes on a much wider meaning. How much wider? Who do they think is my neighbor?

Peter Unger, in his 1992 book, *Living High and Letting Die*, develops the case of The Envelope. You receive a *bona fide* letter from UNICEF, which informs you that thirty children will die if you do not remit to UNICEF \$100 quickly. Assuming you have the money, and assuming that you define UNICEF to be an effective and efficient relief organization, do you have a moral obligation to post a check to UNICEF? His answer is an unequivocal, "Yes." The well-to-do citizens of the global village have a moral responsibility to divest themselves of surplus funds to provide for less well-to-do citizens, even those whose names they could not correctly utter if they read them.

Singer and Unger are categorized as moral cosmopolitans—and very dyed-in-the-wool ones at that. They argue that private citizens living in the affluent West have a moral duty to divest themselves of all assets not necessary "for living a decent, healthy life"² in order to alleviate poverty, hunger, and disease among the poor of the village. Writing in the *Boston Review*, Martha Nussbaum, another dedicated moral cosmopolitan, expresses her fervor for the far-away stranger by asking, "May I give my daughter an expensive college education, while children all over the world are starving and effective relief agencies exist?" To her, like so many cosmopolitans, the acute needs of individuals with unpronounceable names trump the needs of their own children, friends, and immediate community. At core, these cosmopolitans deny that parents have a right to help their own children to prosper.

The Shallow Pond

Singer and Unger draw upon a second case to drive home their point. It is called The Shallow Pond. A teacher, walking to school one morning, spies a child who is clearly in process of drowning in a shallow pond. Does he have a moral responsibility to jump into the pond, muddy and foul though it is, to save the child's life? Even if he does not know how to swim, he is not endangering himself, for

the pond is shallow. What able-bodied adult would be justified in taking no action to save a child in these circumstances? Undeniably, muddied clothes and mild discomfort are "light afflictions" compared to the anguish felt by parents bereft of their child.

Today's moral philosophers use the shallow pond analogy to describe the moral obligations affluent Westerners possess toward less prosperous global villagers. In fact, Peter Unger is remarkably unequivocal, implying that every affluent adult, any affluent adult, everywhere, all the time, has the moral responsibility to jump into every shallow pond to rescue those in any life-threatening situation. Financially, this obligation is essentially boundless. To many cosmopolitans, rescuing the distant stranger from hunger and disease is a moral imperative that should drive the prosperous citizens of the Western world beyond all other considerations.

From a public policy standpoint, these cosmopolitans generally champion the creation of powerful nation-states—or a world government—charged with the responsibility of providing for the children of everyone, everywhere. As they see it, the prime duty of any modern government is to distribute all money above that which is necessary "for living a decent, healthy life" to needy global villagers.

Hence, the practical ramification of this ilk of cosmopolitanism is the establishment of a world-girdling social safety net to protect villagers from hunger, disease, or deprivation. This is simply a restatement of communist wealth-redistributionist economic policies—policies that failed so utterly for decades in the Soviet Union of the last century. Such policies managed, not only to bankrupt a populace, but also, in the end, a government, providing benefits just to the rulers, the ruthless and murderous *politburo*, whose only real concern was their own welfare.

The shallow-pond metaphor is intellectually vacuous to the point of inanity. Most people recognize that a child falling into such a pond presents to society an *emergency* situation, an accident, something that happens rarely rather than regularly. Unger's analogy has little connection to the real-world situation where 18,000 children around the globe die daily for lack of food or medical care.³ If a person committed herself to jumping into ponds to save children on a fulltime basis, every day, all the time, everywhere, he would have to go on the dole, being unable to support himself. If all successful individuals committed themselves to jumping into ponds all the time, the basis of economic production would falter, and those successful individuals would inexorably and inevitably find themselves in as much a state of need as the children they seek to rescue.

Everyone would become a "have not." Everyone, that is, except the ruling class.

Charity Begins at Home

Moral cosmopolitans seek to generalize charity, compelling it to address worldwide needs before it addresses local ones, making it compulsory, state-enforced, and state-administered. By rejecting the important concept that "charity begins at home," moral cosmopolitans are in fact denying the primacy of the home in the care and education of children. They are denying the family as the most efficient institution for the remediation of poverty.

This is why, at heart, most cosmopolitans would deny parents the right to take steps to help ensure the success and prosperity of their own children. Such steps might include providing for them that "expensive college education," which Martha Nussbaum apparently refuses to give her daughter. So, her undereducated daughter is to work at McDonalds at the minimum wage, with no medical benefits, rather than at a major legal firm, pulling down \$300,000 a year? Earning a minimum wage,

how often will the younger Nussbaum be able to write a check to UNICEF for \$100? She could maybe write that check a lot more often had she the law degree that would permit her to earn \$300,000 annually! The math behind Nussbaum's refusal to help her daughter prosper simply does not add up.

Think of it this way: Should Bill Gates, in the interests of providing UNICEF with its requested \$100, have taken a job as a cook at Wendy's rather than establish Microsoft? Could a foundation he may have established as a Wendy's fry-cook been able to "match funds" with today's Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation? This philanthropic organization annually provides more money to charitable causes, worldwide, than all the United States foreign aid programs combined.⁴ *Res ipsa loquitur* ("It speaks for itself").

The Final Solution

Most reasonable people know there are better ways to approach the situation of drowning children in shallow ponds—or for that matter, in any pond. After all, in the real world (as distinct from the world inhabited by postmodern philosophers), if child after child were falling into a particular pond, most people would suggest solutions to the problem quite different from Unger's. Most people would be happy to dedicate public funds towards the draining of the pond, putting a fence around it, or hiring a lifeguard whose fulltime job would be to save drowning children. Wisest of all would be those citizens who would advocate a public program chartered to teach children to swim!

Certainly, there are better ways to organize society to address the problem of world poverty than for everyone to divest himself of surplus funds to feed the poor. Simply giving money to feed the poor—without taking adequate steps to build strong educational and vibrant economic systems—provides only the briefest of respites in the hunger cycle. In other words, it is only a short-term solution.

The reality of the matter is that merely doling out food to the poor not only extends the poverty problem, raising it to a generational issue, but it also exacerbates poverty, making it ever more unmanageable. This is the case since the "saved" children, dole-fed but still uneducated, grow up to produce children who are equally poor and uneducated—without skills and without jobs.⁵ These second-generation poor will naturally claim that they are "entitled" to the same level of aid from the West that their parents enjoyed.

The affluent Westerners, however, burdened with the high taxes imposed by their socialist rulers, will be unable to provide much meaningful assistance to the ever-increasing population of poor in the global village. After a few generations, the affluent will be reduced to the same level of poverty as those who need help. The economic system collapses, as it did in the Soviet Union of the 1980s. At that time, there was a sugar-daddy—America—to bail the leadership out, but next time, America may not have the wherewithal to bail the communists out.

Endnotes

1. Peter Singer and Peter Unger are liberal professors at Princeton University and New York University respectively.
2. Leib, Ethan J., "Rooted Cosmopolitans," a review of *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* by K. A. Appiah, appearing in *Policy Review*, June/July 2006, p.89.

Mr. Appiah is a professor of Philosophy at Princeton University. He is, in many aspects, the epitome of a cosmopolitan: born in Ghana, educated in Cambridge, living in America, a black and a homosexual.

3. "UN: Hunger Kills 18,000 Kids Each Day," Edith M. Lederer, Associated Press Writer, February 21, 2007. The statistic is cited by James Morris, retiring head of the World Food Program, a UN-sponsored food agency headquartered in Rome. Morris, the article continues, "called for students and young people, faith-based groups, the business community and governments to join forces in a global movement to alleviate and eliminate hunger—especially among children."

4. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation claims that it is "dedicated to bringing innovations in health and learning to the global community." See its website at www.gatesfoundation.org/default.htm for details.

5. Many recognize that the most viable solution to poverty is to furnish the poor of the world the tools, the education, and the economic environment where they can work to produce a living for themselves and their posterity.