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Philosophers, Historians, and Suffering Strangers[1]

Abstract

This article juxtaposes two classic essays written in the 1970s, one by philosopher Peter Singer and one by historian Thomas Haskell, in order to identify a shared theme that animates their work: that the availability of repertoires for action to alleviate distant suffering affects our causal relation to the suffering, which in turn affects our responsibility to act. In this way, we see the historical context in which a certain kind of humanitarian appeal played a prominent role in the work of two ground-breaking scholars in different disciplines. The essay also identifies the limits of that kind of appeal by distinguishing what I will call *Suffering Stranger Humanitarianism* from *Causal Contribution Humanitarianism*. It concludes by showing how the latter involves notions of collective responsibility and how both modes of appeal can make use of the notion of complicity.

Keywords: *humanitarianism, suffering, responsibility, complicity*

If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.

– Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"[2]

Before reformers can feel obliged to go out of their way to alleviate the suffering of strangers, they must impute to themselves far-reaching powers of intervention. Before they can know which of the world's many suffering strangers have the strongest claim on their intervention, they must (at least tacitly) take into account not only degrees of immiseration and the ease or difficulty of various kinds of intervention but also a judgment of how complicit both the reformer and the suffering strangers are in the stranger's misery.

– Thomas Haskell, "The Shifting Conventions of Human Agency and Responsibility"[3]

If our actions could alleviate the suffering of a distant stranger, to do nothing would be wrong. This thought has motivated countless activists, volunteers, and donors throughout the long history of transnational humanitarian action, from abolitionism to the rise of humanitarian non-governmental organisations. But to actually be able to intervene from a distance requires being at the end of a causal chain that links or could link our actions to the fate of the suffering stranger. If we cannot perceive that causal link, it is hard to feel morally responsible. In a classic essay on abolitionism, the historian Thomas Haskell tried to explain how modern individuals came to perceive such links in the first place.[4] In another classic essay, the philosopher Peter Singer argued that we are indeed linked to the fate of countless suffering strangers in this way today, and should respond by donating to non-governmental organisations.[5] I bring Haskell and Singer together here in order to draw attention to the historical context in which they were writing. Singer was writing close to the beginning and Haskell close to the end of a stretch of intensely media-driven humanitarian activity running from Biafra in 1968 to the Ethiopian famine of 1983–85. This was a period saturated with images of famine victims and Western non-governmental organisations coming to their aid. While this particular humanitarian milieu clearly influenced Singer, the extent to which it may have influenced Haskell has not been explored. The humanitarian activities of the 1970s and 1980s may even have played a

2   Peter Singer: Famine, Affluence, and Morality, in: Philosophy & Public Affairs 1:3 (1972), pp. 229–243, p. 231.
3   Thomas L. Haskell: Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History, Baltimore 1998, pp. 225–233, p. 229.
4   Thomas Haskell: Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, 2 parts, in: The American Historical Review 90:2 (1985), pp. 339–361; and 90:3 (1985), pp. 547–566.
5   Peter Singer: Famine, Affluence, and Morality, in: Philosophy & Public Affairs 1:3 (1972), pp. 229–243.

part in generating what he took to be a crucial insight into the "logic" of humanitarian action in general, which he then applied to developments in the 18th century in order to identify the "origins" of the humanitarian sensibility.[6]

Tracing historical shifts in how people perceive their causal connection to distant suffering—Haskell's central aim—is crucial to developing an adequate history of transnational humanitarian action. But Haskell developed an incomplete model of such connections. For there are more ways than one to be causally connected to distant strangers. Both Singer and Haskell have been criticised for focusing solely on *individual failure to act* as opposed to *already being causally (and perhaps collectively) implicated* in giving rise to suffering in the first place. I will use this distinction between two types of causal relation to distant suffering in order to distinguish two modes of humanitarian appeal: *Suffering Stranger Humanitarianism*, which appeals to the causal relation generated by being in a position to intervene to alleviate suffering, and *Causal Contribution Humanitarianism*, which discloses ways in which one is already contributing to distant suffering. This distinction is similar to a divide among contemporary philosophical approaches to extreme poverty—there are those who appeal more generally to humanity, and those who point to the causes of injustice. I want to suggest that, when combined with more attention to notions of complicity and collective responsibility, this distinction might also help illuminate elements of the history of transnational humanitarian action.[7]

Analogies, Moral and Historical

During the 1971 famine in what would become Bangladesh, 25-year old Singer wrote the opening lines of his now-famous essay: "As I write this, in November 1971, people are dying in East Bengal from lack of food, shelter, and medical care."[8] The following spring, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" appeared in the third issue of *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, a new journal aimed at making philosophy relevant to public affairs. Unlike

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6   For Haskell's own reflections on the origins of his ideas, see Thomas Haskell: The Shifting Conventions of Human Agency and Responsibility, in: Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History, Baltimore 1998, pp. 225–233. He does not consider whether his turn toward analyzing humanitarianism in 1979 was influenced by any external factors.

7   More generally, I hope this essay might foster conversation among philosophers and historians on humanitarianism. I am not a historian, but I do think attending to the history of real people and their motivations can enhance philosophical inquiry. See Jeffrey Flynn: Human Rights in History and Contemporary Practice: Source Materials for Philosophy, in: Claudio Corradetti (ed.): Philosophical Dimensions of Human Rights: Some Contemporary Views, Dordrecht 2012, pp. 3–22; and Jeffrey Flynn: Genealogies of Human Rights—What's at Stake?, in: Adam Etinson (ed.): Human Rights: Moral or Political?, Oxford, forthcoming.

8   Peter Singer: Famine, Affluence, and Morality, p. 229.

most philosophical works, the essay referred to a current event and specified the precise historical moment at which it had been written. Echoing humanitarian appeals, Singer attempted to collapse the distance between the reader and suffering strangers. He also juxtaposed the realm of the intellect—a solitary philosopher writing at his desk—with the world of urgently needed action—he asks us to imagine horrible suffering, *at the very same moment*, but far away. His first readers would have been familiar with stark images of suffering strangers, if not from media coverage of the famine in East Bengal then from the endless stream of pictures of starving children that had emerged from Biafra in the summer of 1968.

Distant suffering, and the moral obligation to alleviate it, are the focus of Singer's essay. He posits the following analogy. If while walking to work one morning you happen upon a child drowning in a shallow pond, the moral duty to wade in and save the child would surely override any considerations about ruining your clothes or being late for work. Likewise, if there is a child dying very far away whom you could save at relatively little cost to yourself—say, by making a 200 Dollar donation to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund—then you ought to do it.[9] We are no less morally obliged to save the distant stranger than a child right in front of us. Indeed, Singer maintains that when it is so easy to help, failing to do so amounts to doing something wrong. He even argues that our moral obligation cannot be satisfied by just making a single donation to save one life—there are so many suffering strangers—but that we are morally required to give until giving any more would make us worse off than those we are trying to save.

The strength of this analogy depends on the degree to which the first situation—saving a child drowning in a shallow pond—captures the morally and empirically salient features of the second situation—donating to a non-governmental organisation to save a life. Since most people agree that walking away from the child in the pond would be egregiously wrong, we are supposed to agree that failing to donate money to a non-governmental organisation is equally wrong. One can imagine the non-governmental organisation as an extremely long arm pulling someone out of a distant pond.

> Unfortunately for those who like to keep their moral responsibilities limited, instant communication and swift transportation have changed the situation. From the moral point of view, the development of the world into a "global village" has made an important, though still unrecognized, difference to our moral situation. Expert observers and supervisors, sent out by famine relief organizations or permanently

9   This calculation comes from Peter Singer: The Singer Solution to World Poverty, in: The New York Times Magazine (1999), unpaginated online version available at http://www.nytimes.com/1999/09/05/magazine/the-singer-solution-to-world-poverty.html. Peter Singer later admitted that calculating how much to donate in order to save a life might be more complicated. See Peter Singer: The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty, New York 2009.

stationed in famine-prone areas, can direct our aid to a refugee in Bengal almost as effectively as we could get it to someone in our own block. There would seem, therefore, to be no possible justification for discriminating on geographical grounds.[10]

Singer's essay was perhaps the first philosophical response to the novel situation in which distant suffering was being presented to Western audiences more vividly than ever and the humanitarian non-governmental organisations that were increasingly on the ground around the globe were quickly becoming central moral symbols in the Western social imaginary.[11] In a radical move, Singer injected the urgency associated with activism into a realm of philosophical thought and deliberation that is not normally associated with urgency of any kind.[12] He had realised how moral conventions can seem all too inadequate in a world in which we are immediately informed about suffering elsewhere on the planet and also know that the means to get there and alleviate it are technically available, even if specific solutions are not obvious. If we think of saving a life as the humanitarian gesture *par excellence*, relief organisations provide the morally tantalising possibility of consummating this gesture at great distance—indeed, anywhere in the world. In this way, Singer's argument is essentially about *individual moral action at a distance*.[13]

10   Peter Singer: Famine, Affluence, and Morality, p. 232.

11   See Kevin O'Sullivan: Humanitarian Encounters: Biafra, NGOs, and Imaginings of the Third World in Britain and Ireland, 1967–70, in: Journal of Genocide Research 16:2–3 (2014), pp. 299–315, p. 300.

12   That he did so is not entirely surprising. He came to Oxford in 1969 fresh from the Australian anti-war movement to write a thesis on civil disobedience, which he completed in 1971. This "unorthodox university thesis" (vi) was published as *Democracy and Disobedience* in 1973 (Oxford: Clarendon), the same year in which his ground-breaking essay *Animal Liberation* appeared in The New York Review of Books, April 5, 1973. See Dale Jamieson: Singer and the Practical Ethics Movement, in: Dale Jamieson (ed.): Singer and His Critics, Oxford 1999, pp 1–17.

13   Although the idea that one could save a life anywhere in the world is in many ways quite appealing, Peter Singer has not been able to sustain the degree of optimism about the effectiveness of NGOs he displayed in his original essay. See his more recent *The Life You Can Save. Acting Now to End World Poverty*, in particular ch. 6–7. For criticisms of Peter Singer's analogy for oversimplifying the relation between the donor and the suffering stranger, see Leif Wenar: Poverty is No Pond, in: Patricia Illingworth et al. (eds.): Giving Well: The Ethics of Philanthropy, Oxford 2011, pp. 104–132, and Jennifer Rubenstein: Samaritans and States: The Political Ethics of Humanitarian INGOs, Oxford 2015. For historical and sociological background on the idea of urgent action in the context of humanitarian emergencies, see Craig Calhoun: The Idea of Emergency: Humanitarian Action and Global (Dis)Order, in: Didier Fassin/Mariella Pandolfi (eds.): Contemporary States of Emergency, New York 2010, pp. 29–58; and Didier Fassin: Heart of Humaneness: The Moral Economy of Humanitarian Intervention, in: Didier Fassin/Mariella Pandolfi (eds.): Contemporary States of Emergency, New York 2010, pp. 269–294.

In an essay first presented in April 1979, Haskell set out to explain how denizens of the North Atlantic first became able to perceive the possibility of such individual moral action at a distance only in the 18th century.[14] He did so by intervening in a long-standing debate among historians about whether the rise of the antislavery movement was connected to the rise of capitalism.[15] Haskell's novel claim was that there was a connection, but that it was indirect: Expanded causal horizons encouraged by the rise of the market economy extended perceptions of long-distance causal involvement and, with that, expanded people's sense of moral responsibility. With this account, he specifically challenged the connection between capitalism and antislavery posited by historian David Brion Davis in his 1975 book *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823.*[16] Davis had argued that class interest was the key to understanding the connection between capitalism and humanitarianism, and that the early antislavery activism of Quaker capitalists was actually a "highly selective response to labour exploitation."[17] According to Davis, opposing slavery served the interests of a capitalist class interested in disciplining labour and providing moral legitimation for their own economic activities, which were "less visibly dependent on human suffering and injustice."[18]

Haskell challenged this aspect of Davis's argument by arguing that, on the contrary, the moral selectivity displayed by the Quakers is better explained as a pervasive feature of humanitarian action: "What is crucially important to see is that we never include within our circle of responsibility all those events in which we are causally involved. We always set limits that fall short of our power to intervene."[19] The selectivity of English Quakers was better explained, Haskell maintained, by looking at how conventions are always operative in that selectivity. In order to forcefully make that point, he introduced a thought experiment he called the Case of the Starving Stranger:

> As I sit at my desk writing this essay, and as you, the reader, now sit reading it, both of us are aware that some people in Phnom Penh, Bombay, Rangoon, the Sahel, and elsewhere will die next week of starvation. They are strangers; all we know about them

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14   Thomas Haskell notes in the acknowledgments that the essay was first presented at the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in April 1979.

15   For a helpful overview of the waves of debate over how to explain the rise of abolitionism, see Seymour Drescher: Antislavery Debates: Tides of Historiography in Slavery and Antislavery, in: European Review 19:1 (2011), pp. 131–148. My aim here is more narrowly tailored toward Thomas Haskell's central claim about how changes in perceptions of causal connections are relevant to changes in feelings of responsibility.

16   The relevant chapters of David Brion Davis' book for Thomas Haskell's thesis are reprinted in Thomas Bender (ed.): The Antislavery Debate, Berkeley 1992.

17   David Brion Davis: The Quaker Ethic and the Antislavery International, reprinted in: Thomas Bender (ed.): The Antislavery Debate, Berkeley 1992, pp. 27–64, p. 61.

18   Ibid.

19   Thomas Haskell: Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part I, p. 355.

is that they will die. We also know that it would be possible for any one of us to sell a car or a house, buy an airline ticket, fly to Bombay or wherever, seek out at least one of those starving strangers, and save his life, or at the very least extend it. We could be there tomorrow, and we really could save him. Now to admit that we have it in our power to prevent this person's death by starvation is to admit that our inaction—our preference for sitting here, reading and writing about moral responsibility, going on with our daily routine—is a necessary condition for the stranger's death. But for our refusal to go to his aid, he would live.[20]

Quite the opposite to Singer's pond analogy, which was supposed to inspire us to act by pointing to something we really could do, Haskell's analogy was supposed to illuminate the kind of moral selectivity that allows people to go about their day *without* feeling morally responsible for things they really could do, because those actions are highly unconventional—like flying all the way around the world to actually save a life.

Despite the opposing aims, the overlap with Singer's thinking here is rather striking.[21] The opening lines of Singer's essay are even echoed in Haskell's account: "As I sit at my desk writing this essay [...]"[22] Moreover, Haskell sounds much like Singer when noting how new technologies affect our sense of moral responsibility:

Curiously, our feeling of responsibility for the stranger's plight […] is probably stronger today than it would have been before the airplane […] This suggests that new technology—using that word broadly to refer to all means of accomplishing our ends, including new institutions and political organizations that enable us to attain ends otherwise out of reach—can change the moral universe in which we live. Technological innovation can perform this startling feat, because it supplies us with new ways of acting at a distance and new ways of influencing future events and thereby imposes new occasions for the attribution of responsibility and guilt. In short, new techniques, or ways of intervening in the course of events, can change the conventional limits within which we feel responsible enough to act.[23]

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20   Ibid., pp. 354–355.
21   Thomas Haskell also used what he called the Case of the Vegetarian Historian, noting that "prominent publications like the New York Review of Books occasionally run articles on the problematical ethics of eating flesh" (p. 353). Peter Singer's own essay on this topic appeared there in 1973 (see footnote twelve above). Curiously, Thomas Haskell never mentions Peter Singer's work.
22   Thomas Haskell: Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part I, p. 354.
23   Ibid., p. 356.

In a later reply to critics, Haskell stresses this point in a way that has the most affinity with Singer's argument, imagining the "radical change" that would occur in our sense of moral responsibility if a new technology enabled us to travel "instantaneously and at trivial expense" to any scene of disaster in the world. "If we could save someone's life by merely reaching out to press a button, we would be monsters not to do so."[24] He follows this with a more mundane reference to non-governmental organisations:

> A more familiar example of an innovation in institutional "technology" that induces people to make a (nominally) humane gesture they would not otherwise have made is the "Live Aid" rock concert; another, of a much more substantial sort, is the creation of an organization such as Amnesty International that collects funds, publicizes abuses, and provides a new means of exerting influence.[25]

Haskell's ultimate aim was to show that it is not until people have such effective techniques available for alleviating the suffering of distant strangers that they shift from feeling passive sympathy to a more operative sense of responsibility to actually do something. Those techniques, he argued, must become sufficiently ordinary that they alter what people take to be within the range of morally required action. Historically, it was not until the late 18th century that denizens of the North Atlantic came to see that they could effectively intervene to abolish slavery, in part due to the expansion of causal perception acquired through market relations and in part due to specific new techniques, also developed by Quakers, such as mass petitions and boycotts. Hence, it was only then that slavery went from being widely seen as an unavoidable evil to being seen by many as something to be abolished.

Haskell uses the case of the starving stranger to bring out the "crucial anatomical features of the historical process" that "gave rise to the modern humanitarian conscience."[26] More specifically, he describes four general preconditions that must be in place before people will come to the aid of suffering strangers:

1. They must be committed to a general ethical maxim that requires them to help strangers.
2. They must perceive themselves as causally involved in the stranger's suffering in the sense that they come to see their own "refusal to act" as a necessary condition without which the suffering would not occur.

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24   Thomas Haskell: Convention and Hegemonic Interest in the Debate over Antislavery: A Reply to Davis and Ashworth, in: Thomas Bender (ed.): The Antislavery Debate, Berkeley 1992, pp. 200–260, p. 221.
25   Ibid.
26   Thomas Haskell: Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part I, p. 353.

3. They must be able to see a way to stop the suffering: "We must perceive a causal connection, a chain made up of cause-and-effect links, that begins with some act of ours as cause and ends with the alleviation of the stranger's suffering as effect."[27]

4. Finally, the available recipes for intervention "must be ones of sufficient ordinariness, familiarity, certainty of effect, and ease of operation that our failure to use them would constitute a suspension of routine, an out-of-the-ordinary event, possibly even an intentional act in itself. Only then will we begin to feel that our inaction is not merely one among many conditions necessary for the occurrence or continuation of the evil event but instead a significant contributory *cause*."[28]

This kind of general model has the ring of something a philosopher might put forward. Indeed, Singer was trying to convince people to see non-governmental organisations in precisely the way described in Step 4, so that failing to donate to one might seem just as morally egregious as failing to save a drowning child in front of us. But could such an abstract model actually provide an adequate explanation of the rise of British abolitionism within the larger debates to which Haskell aimed to contribute?

On the Perils of Doing History by Ahistorical Abstraction[29]

I cannot address all the details of the multifaceted historiographical debate generated by Haskell's essay.[30] But I do want to point to the striking lack of discussion of the Case of the Starving Stranger in that literature. Haskell himself bemoaned the fact that neither Davis nor John Ashworth paid any attention to it in their replies to his essay. The hypothetical case, Haskell argued, "embodies the crucial anatomical features of the process that I believe gave rise to the humanitarian sensibility, and anyone wishing to challenge my thesis will find their target here."[31] Why would his critics ignore the very thing he thought essential to his argument?

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27   Ibid., p. 358.
28   Ibid.
29   This section title is inspired by the title of the essay by David Brion Davis: The Perils of Doing History by Ahistorical Abstraction: A Reply to Thomas L. Haskell's AHR Forum Reply, in: Thomas Bender (ed.): The Antislavery Debate, Berkeley 1992, pp. 290–310.
30   See Thomas Bender (ed.): The Antislavery Debate, Berkeley 1992, in which Thomas Haskell's original essays were reprinted along with replies by David Brion Davis and John Ashworth and Thomas Haskell's reply to their replies.
31   Thomas Haskell: Convention and Hegemonic Interest in the Debate over Antislavery: A Reply to Davis and Ashworth, p. 219.

One answer is supplied by Davis in his reply to this point. He draws attention to some of the implicit assumptions embedded in the example, criticizing:

Haskell's continuing emphasis on individual charity and his traditional Christian image of the suffering or starving "stranger," whose agonies *never result from oppressive actions or institutions*. Since Haskell's "recipe knowledge" is so geared to the effects of technology on individual acts of charity, he can give us the astonishingly ahistorical example of an American citizen selling his car to raise funds in order to fly to Phnom Penh or Bombay and feed a starving stranger. I call this ahistorical because, for all of Haskell's talk about airplanes increasing our feeling of responsibility, he never once recognizes the *direct "causal connection"* between actions taken by the U.S. government and the miseries in Cambodia, or for that matter in Bombay after the backfiring of our well-intentioned efforts to aid India's agricultural production (to say nothing about the maimed and starving strangers of Bhopal). If John Ashworth and I have disappointed Haskell by not giving much attention to his "case of the starving stranger," it is because the example is irrelevant to the history of abolitionism—or to more contemporary instances of massive oppression, exploitation, and suffering.[32]

Davis is right that Haskell's focus on how changing technology motivates individual acts of charity tells us nothing about the causal relations entailed when one participates in an oppressive social order. But is Davis right to say that this makes Haskell's hypothetical case irrelevant?

On the one hand, Haskell himself does not take the case of the starving stranger to provide a complete picture of what gave rise to abolitionism. He admits to building on all the work already done by his interlocutors and other historians. Nor is the hypothetical case supposed to embody all that is evil about slavery. The point was not to embody the attitudes of actual abolitionists, but to unpack the logic underlying a shift from seeing something as an unavoidable evil to seeing it as something that can and therefore must be stopped. In this way, the case is well-designed to highlight the ways in which conventions limit our sense of operative responsibility and to support Haskell's primary aim: to identify, conceptually and historically, "a threshold in the perception of personal agency and responsibility."[33]

On the other hand, Davis is right to stress how odd it is, particularly in the case of the horrific suffering resulting from slavery and the slave trade, to focus so heavily on the question of how people come to view themselves as responsible *merely for alleviating* as

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32   David Brion Davis: The Perils of Doing History by Ahistorical Abstraction: A Reply to Thomas L. Haskell's AHR Forum Reply, p. 307 (italics added).

33   Thomas Haskell: Convention and Hegemonic Interest in the Debate over Antislavery: A Reply to Davis and Ashworth, p. 223.

opposed to *causally contributing to* the suffering. But rather than reject the utility of the hypothetical case, it might be helpful to identify more precisely where Haskell goes astray and whether the model can be augmented to include other causal relations.

In fact, it appears that Haskell over-generalises from his own hypothetical case and misses the extent to which an alternative causal relation could easily be inserted at the start. He mistakenly takes his proposed explanation for what moves people to act (that they see their failure to act as playing a causal role in the distant harm) as the only route through which people can feel causally implicated in a distant harm. Summing up the case's significance, he says it shows that "no matter how hard people strive to live up to moral codes, they have *no occasion for feeling causally implicated* in the suffering of a stranger until they possess techniques capable of affecting his condition."[34] More specifically, the problem lies in the way he spells out the logic behind the second precondition above, which as a general proposition could simply say that we must perceive ourselves as causally involved in some way. One way of perceiving ourselves to be causally involved—taking a cue from Davis—is to see a *direct causal connection* between us and the distant harm. Pointing to this, as some abolitionists did with sugar and rum boycotts, may be sufficient in getting people to perceive themselves as causally involved. Yet, Haskell overstates his point when he spells out precondition three:

> We *cannot* regard ourselves as causally involved in another's suffering unless we see a way to stop it. We must perceive a causal connection, a chain made up of cause-and-effect links, that begins with some act of ours as cause and ends with the alleviation of the stranger's suffering as effect.[35]

He really does seem to have in mind here a suffering stranger with whom one has no prior causal connection.

To complicate matters, Haskell's hypothetical case does not even embody the salient features of his own historical exemplar: the early Quaker abolitionist John Woolman. As Haskell puts it,

> the order of Woolman's thoughts in his classic 1746 essay, "Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes," corresponds closely with the stages I contend anyone would have had to undergo as he moved intellectually from a world in which slave misery provoked only the passive sympathy we feel today for starving strangers to a world in which remaining passive in the face of such misery seemed unconscionable.[36]

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34   Thomas Haskell: Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part II, p. 556 (italics added).
35   Ibid. (italics added).
36   Ibid., p. 564.

Haskell notes how Woolman began by refuting objections based on the moral conventions of his time: that the Golden Rule does not extend to strangers and that slave-owners, given their initial investment, were entitled to their slaves' labour. Woolman also had to address the causal conventions of his time. "Many people in his society were virtually incapable of perceiving their *acts or omissions* as significant contributory causes of the slave's plight."[37] Convincing slaveholders of the distant consequences of their conduct was Woolman's lifework, in particular trying to get them to see that the "geographical remoteness of the scene of initial enslavement… was no defense."[38] In Woolman's own words: "To willingly join with unrighteousness to the injury of men who live some thousands of miles off is the same in substance as joining with it to the injury of our neighbours."[39] Haskell himself stressed the extent to which Woolman was primarily trying to get slaveholders to see that they were causally contributing to a distant harm (in this case, the initial enslavement, regardless of how well they were treating their slaves), not that their failure to make use of an available recipe for action implicated them in suffering.

It may be that the perils of doing history by ahistorical abstraction, at least in this case, lie mainly in not constructing hypothetical cases carefully enough. Even if the case of the starving stranger does provide a good example of how conventions affect selectivity, it does not embody the full range of causal relations relevant to cases of suffering strangers in general and certainly not with regard to slavery.

Two Modes of Humanitarian Appeal

The very thing about Haskell's analysis that impresses many philosophical readers—his use of thought experiments and conceptual analysis—is in part what troubled his fellow historians. His most general conceptual point, inspired by philosophical work on causation, was that there is an intimate relation between perceptions of causal involvement with suffering and feelings of responsibility. Even though Haskell failed to provide a sufficiently

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37   Thomas Haskell: Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part II, p. 564 (italics added). He refers here to both omissions and acts as contributory causes, something almost entirely absent from his hypothetical case. Only in two passages does he even allude to the possibility of another way of being "causally involved": when he refers to the possibility of "action aimed at *avoiding* or alleviating the evil in question" (Thomas Haskell: Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part I, p. 358 [italics added]) and when he refers to "the range of events in which [people] perceive themselves to be causally involved, either by *commission* or omission" (ibid., p. 360 [italics added]).

38   Thomas Haskell: Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part II, p. 565.

39   Ibid., p. 565. Thomas Haskell also notes the extent to which John Woolman saw how supply and demand worked: "The idea that by owning a slave (or even a product of slave labor) one helped constitute the demand without which suppliers of slave labor could not stay in business gained plausibility in the decades ahead […]" (p. 566).

comprehensive model of the relevant causal relations, his work does suggest that better understanding the history of concern for distant suffering requires paying close attention to shifting conventions in perceptions of causal involvement, agency, and responsibility.

Philosophers who challenge Singer's framing of the problem of distant suffering have echoed Davis's critique of Haskell by proposing that we must pay more attention to the causal relations that generate or exacerbate distant suffering. The most prominent has been Thomas Pogge. In contrast to Singer, who starts with a positive duty to aid others (one that becomes particularly compelling in urgent rescue situations), Pogge starts with a negative duty not to harm.[40] He then attempts to show that the global institutional order that Westerners participate in and benefit from is causing or at least significantly exacerbating harm in the form of extreme poverty. Hence, while the morally salient causal nexus for Singer is the one established by the fact that an individual *could* save a life, for Pogge the key causal nexus is established by our *already being implicated* in an institutional scheme that has caused or is exacerbating harm.[41]

Pogge is not the only contemporary philosopher to go beyond focusing on benevolence or altruism to stress the economic, political, and historical relations that structure and contribute to poverty-related suffering. Such approaches stress how responsibility for distant suffering is generated by some existing connection to suffering strangers. The focus varies according to the ways in which the contribution to or participation in unjust transnational relations is analysed.[42] But the main point is that, in contrast to Singer's focus on the individual's responsibility to act to alleviate distant suffering, these approaches make the international system the focal point.[43]

The philosophical literature on all this is by now quite sophisticated. We can simplify by taking a cue from Haskell's focus and comparing the different types of argument in terms of types of causal claims they make. Both Singer and Haskell focused, for very different reasons, on how *inaction* can come to be perceived as a cause of a stranger's

40 See Thomas Pogge: World Poverty and Human Rights, Cambridge 2002; and Politics as Usual: What Lies Behind the Pro-Poor Rhetoric, Cambridge 2010.

41 It is worth noting the personal reflections with which Thomas Pogge, born in Germany in 1953, opens his own recent book. He refers to the disturbing realisation, as a young child, that so many of his fellow citizens either committed or were complicit in horrible crimes, and notes how this parallels the situation of citizens in affluent countries today with regard to extreme poverty. See Thomas Pogge: Politics as Usual, pp. 1–2.

42 For an account focusing on contributions to deprivation, see Christian Barry: Applying the Contribution Principle, in: Metaphilosophy 36:1–2 (2005), pp. 210–227; on abuses of transnational power, see Richard Miller: Globalising Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power, Oxford 2010; on the coercive nature of international institutions, see Nicole Hassoun: Globalisation and Global Justice: Shrinking Distance, Expanding Obligations, Cambridge 2014.

43 On the origins of this strand of thinking, which arose as an alternative to Peter Singer in the early 1970s, see Samuel Moyn: The Political Origins of Global Justice, s.l. forthcoming.

suffering.[44] Singer relies on the moral responsibility of any human being to help any other human being when in a position to do so at little cost to oneself. The causal claim focuses on establishing that one is in that position. Many of the justice-based approaches, on the other hand, attempt to specify a pre-existing causal nexus that generates responsibility for a distant injustice (much like Woolman in his classic 1746 essay).

Here we can distinguish two modes of humanitarian appeal based on two general types of causal relation. Let us call the first mode *Suffering Stranger Humanitarianism*. It attempts to mobilise action primarily by appealing to people's sense of their capacity to alleviate suffering. As Singer puts it, if it is "so easy to help people" and we "fail to do so, aren't we *doing something wrong*?"[45] Many non-governmental organisations have relied precisely on this form of humanitarian appeal in recent decades. Indeed, the core of this kind of appeal is found in one of the most dominant images of the contemporary humanitarian era: the starving child presented with only a vague relation to place or circumstance. This mode of appeal relies primarily on stressing the causal relation constituted by, as Haskell puts it, an available recipe for intervention.

Let us call the second mode of appeal *Causal Contribution Humanitarianism*.[46] It attempts to mobilise action primarily by pointing to ways in which people are already implicated in some causal nexus that is giving rise to the suffering of distant strangers. Adam Hochschild captures the strand of British abolitionism that took this route when he maintains that their "first job was to make Britons understand what lay behind the

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44   Strictly speaking, for consequentialists like Peter Singer inaction always counts as a cause of whatever results from failure to act. I take it Thomas Haskell was trying to capture a more common sense notion of when one's inaction can come to seem, even to the non-consequentialist, like a cause. Peter Singer's example of failing to save a drowning child is meant to be non-controversial in this sense. One need not be a consequentialist to think that the child would not drown except for the failure of the bystander to act, and that this causal relation is what makes inaction morally egregious.

45   Peter Singer: The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty, p. xiv.

46   Neither Peter Singer nor Thomas Pogge use the term "humanitarianism" to describe their work, but the philosopher Tom Campbell uses the language of "humanity" and "inhumanity" to distinguish his approach from arguments about "justice" like Thomas Pogge's. See Tom Campbell: Humanity before Justice, in: British Journal of Political Science 4 (1974), pp. 1–16; and Tom Campbell: Poverty as a Violation of Human Rights: Inhumanity or Injustice?, in: Thomas Pogge (ed.): Freedom from Poverty as a Human Right, Oxford 2007, pp. 5–74. Justice theorists might bristle at using the term "humanitarian appeal" to refer to both modes. But I refer to these as two forms of "humanitarian" appeal in order to capture the idea that humanitarian appeals made with the aim of motivating action to alleviate the suffering of distant strangers can have very different types of argument underlying them. Another reason for using the term is just that we might generally think of modern humanitarianism as "the widespread inclination to protest against obvious and pointless physical suffering." Norman Fiering: Irresistible Compassion: An Aspect of Eighteenth-Century Sympathy and Humanitarianism, in: Journal of the History of Ideas 37:2 (1976), pp. 195–218, p. 195.

sugar they ate, the tobacco they smoked, the coffee they drank."[47] In its paradigmatic form, this mode of appeal relies on stressing the causal contribution one is already making to the stranger's plight.

What I have in mind here are ideal types that can be distinguished according to the primary causal relation invoked with the aim of moving people beyond passive sympathy and toward feeling the kind of operative responsibility that can motivate action. Each takes up a different evidential burden.[48] Thus, when people make the kind of appeal at the core of *Suffering Stranger Humanitarianism*, they typically focus mainly on establishing that there is an available and effective way to intervene. When people make the kind of appeal at the core of *Causal Contribution Humanitarianism*, on the other hand, they typically focus on identifying an existing causal nexus that is giving rise to suffering. The former tries to motivate those who are capable, the latter those who are culpable.[49]

It would be worth investigating and analysing the ways in which these different types of humanitarian appeal have been deployed, independently and in conjunction with each other, in a variety of historical episodes up to the present, keeping in mind that ideal types rarely appear in all their purity. Take, for instance, the Nigerian civil war and famine in Biafra, which relied heavily on the iconic image of the starving child and is often viewed as the beginning of the contemporary humanitarian era. The historian Lasse Heerten vividly captures what was presented to Western audiences in the news media:

> Within a few weeks in mid-1968, a dystopian vision of postcolonial catastrophe turned Biafra into an international media event. Starting in mid-June, newsstands across Western Europe and North America were repeatedly plastered with the pictures of haggard infants, emaciated skeletons with bloated bellies and eyes that seemed to condemn the passive beholder. A new icon of Third World misery was born: "Biafran babies."[50]

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47   Adam Hochschild: Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves, New York 2006, p. 6.

48   For an excellent discussion of both types of argument in slightly different terms, see Holly Lawford-Smith: The Motivation Question: Arguments from Justice and from Humanity, in: British Journal of Political Science 42:3 (2012), pp. 661–678.

49   Obviously any approach to the latter also has to be concerned, at some point, with identifying those who are capable of intervening. See David Miller: Distributing Responsibilities, in: The Journal of Political Philosophy 9:4 (2001), pp. 453–471. Thus, the two types of appeal can end up being part of the same campaign. Nor do I intend this typology to be exhaustive. There are certainly many other forms a humanitarian appeal can take, for example, identity-based appeals to Christians to intervene to alleviate the suffering of a group of fellow Christians. My aim here is to distinguish the aspects of humanitarian appeals that rely on claims about a causal relation to distant suffering. I thank Lasse Heerten for pressing me to clarify this point.

50   Lasse Heerten: The Dystopia of Postcolonial Catastrophe: Self-Determination, the Biafran War of Secession, and the 1970s Human Rights Movement, in: Samuel Moyn/Jan Eckel (eds.):

This image is often thought to be paradigmatic for a kind of *Suffering Stranger Humanitarianism* that simply says to the viewer: you can save a life. But such images have also been used in conjunction with appeals to direct causal contribution. Famously, Eglantyne Jebb, the founder of Save the Children and an innovator in using images of starving children, was arrested in 1919 for distributing a pamphlet in Trafalgar Square entitled, "A Starving Baby and Our Blockade has Caused This."[51] In fact, many British campaigners on behalf of Biafra pointed to ways in which Britain was contributing to suffering in Biafra insofar as the British government was providing moral and material support to the Nigerian federal government. The British pro-Biafran journalist Frederick Forsyth's book *Biafra Story,* in which he accused Britain of being guilty of supporting the Nigerians in genocide and likened it to the treatment of Jews in the Second World War, sold out in a matter of weeks in 1969.[52]

In some ways this episode brings to light both the strengths and the limits of the respective types of appeal. On the one hand, the idea that one is causally implicated in distant suffering through the actions of one's own government can surely hit home. On the other hand, direct appeals to Britain's role in the crisis could obviously only appeal, if at all, to the British. The suffering stranger can potentially appeal to anyone in a position to act. This potential for broader appeal may explain, at least in part, how ubiquitous this form of appeal has become.

Complicity, Agency, and Responsibility

Causal Contribution Humanitarianism raises complex questions that individualistic frameworks are not well designed to capture. For one thing, the vast majority of individuals, though of course not all, are correct in not seeing themselves as the primary cause of any particular occurrence of far-off suffering. Britain may have been contributing to the famine in Biafra by supporting the Nigerian federal government, but neither Britain nor ordinary Britons were the sole cause. Hence, an expanded model of causal responsibility must include notions of collective responsibility and degrees of complicity. Haskell had nothing to say about either, in part because he drew heavily on analysis of causation by the philosopher Herbert Lionel Adolphus Hart, who only discussed the notion of

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The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s, Philadelphia 2014, pp. 15–31, p. 19.

51   This effort was in conjunction with her forming the Famine Council, whose aim was to end the British blockade that was exacerbating post-war famine in Europe. See Michael Barnett: Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism, Ithaca 2011, p. 85.

52   See Lasse Heerten: "A" as in Auschwitz, "B" as in Biafra: The Nigerian Civil War, Visual Narratives of Genocide, and the Fragmented Universalization of the Holocaust, in: Heide Fehrenbach/Davide Rodogno (eds.): Humanitarian Photography: A History, Cambridge 2015, pp. 249–274, p. 263.

complicity in terms of standard cases of being an *individual* accomplice to another *individual's* crime.[53] Recent philosophical work on complicity has expanded to include the concepts of collective agency and responsibility.[54] Adequately conceptualising this type of complicity—the domain of responsibility that includes relations between an agent and a harm that are mediated by the actions of other agents and institutions—requires close attention to the way collective notions of agency and responsibility differ from individual notions.

The philosopher Iris Young has introduced an innovative model in order to better understand claims about collective responsibility such as, for example, those made by the anti-sweatshop movement.[55] She has rightly argued that the standard "liability model" of responsibility, which attempts to assign discrete blame to particular individuals for specific actions is not at all apt for thinking about the kind of responsibility such activists appeal to when they try to get us to take collective responsibility for ending such practices. The challenge is that, as she puts it, "people have difficulty reasoning about individual responsibility with relation to outcomes produced by large-scale social structures in which millions participate, but of which none are the sole or primary cause."[56] As an alternative to individualised models of moral responsibility that attempt to isolate and assign blame, she proposes a collective notion of political responsibility. Relying on what she calls a "social connection model," she analyses the way certain appeals call on us to acknowledge our shared responsibility for the kinds of background conditions that produce and reproduce unjust outcomes. Young's conception of political responsibility is a helpful way of conceiving the kind of responsibility that is often invoked by causal contribution humanitarianism. Many in the British pro-Biafran campaign were trying to do precisely this: get their fellow citizens to take up their shared political responsibility for the conditions contributing to the situation in Biafra.

Can anything similar be said about British abolitionism? In a fascinating recent essay, the historian Richard Huzzey maintains that notions of collective responsibility were not only operative for motivating British abolitionists but, in a crucial twist, were decisive in determining the *limits* of Britons' sense of the geographical scope of their moral responsibility. Work on "transnational compassion," Huzzey maintains, has not paid adequate attention to the extent to which "the notion of national complicity was

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53   Herbert Lionel Adolphus Hart/Tony Honore: Causation and the Law, Oxford 1959.

54   See Christopher Kutz: Complicity: Ethics and Law for a Collective Age, Cambridge 2000, p. 2. For an application of the notion of complicity to the activities of contemporary humanitarian NGOs, see Chiara Lepora/Robert E. Goodin: On Complicity and Compromise, Oxford 2013.

55   See Iris Marion Young: Responsibility and Global Labor Justice, in: The Journal of Political Philosophy 12:4 (2004), pp. 365–388; and Iris Marion Young: Responsibility for Justice, Oxford 2011.

56   Iris Marion Young: Responsibility and Global Labor Justice, p. 374.

crucial in mobilising individual Britons to petition, abstain from slave-grown produce or otherwise pressure parliament."[57] He distinguishes Woolman's radical and unbounded sense of personal responsibility, which motivated him to avoid consuming all products of slave labour regardless of where produced, from the more geographically bounded sense of moral responsibility of most Britons, which was "strongly infused with the moral geography of empire" and led them to focus primarily on ending slavery in Britain's own colonies.[58] Contrasting his view with Haskell's, Huzzey maintains that "it was not an expansion of responsibility for far-away suffering that permitted the rise of abolitionism but a new responsibility for suffering inflicted by the British state under its laws or by its subjects."[59] Given the willingness of many to consume goods produced by slaves outside the Empire, the limits of active national complicity appear to have defined their sense of the limits of moral responsibility.

Huzzey puts his finger on what is perhaps one of the central factors in motivating individuals to take action with regard to a harm to which they are related in a mediated form: they must perceive themselves to be members of some social or political network or collectivity that is causally contributing to the harm.[60] Or at least this seems to be the case if they are to be motivated to get on board with a *collective* mobilisation to end the harm. For if individuals view the situation solely in terms of whether they each have "clean hands," they may only be motivated to end their own participation. Indeed, at least some adherents of the "free produce" movement, a group of radical abolitionists who boycotted all slave-made goods, were motivated more by individual purity than by ending slave suffering.[61]

Although Huzzey is critical of Haskell, it is worth asking whether Haskell's model can accommodate Huzzey's point about national complicity. Haskell's central claim about the rise of the market economy expanding the scope of people's horizons of causal responsibility in the 18th century is consistent with Huzzey's central claim that those horizons could also be restricted or mediated in a variety of ways. Haskell's stated aim was to identify the "minimum conditions" that had to be satisfied before substantial numbers of people might act regularly with the aim of alleviating the suffering of strangers.

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57 Richard Huzzey: The Moral Geography of British Anti-Slavery Responsibilities, in: Transactions of the Royal Historical Society 22 (2012), pp. 111–139, p. 111.

58 Ibid., p. 116.

59 Ibid., p. 138.

60 See Christopher Kutz: Complicity: Ethics and Law for a Collective Age, p. 187.

61 See Carol Faulkner: The Root of the Evil: Free Produce and Radical Antislavery, 1820–1860, in: Journal of the Early Republic 27:3 (2007), pp. 298–299. Iris Young argues that individualistic attempts to maintain moral purity are not only typically futile when the causal structures implicate nearly everyone, but they constitute a failure to take seriously one's shared political responsibility for ending injustice. Iris Marion Young: Responsibility and Global Labor Justice, p. 379.

Moreover, he focused on "new technology," broadly construed to include institutions and political organisations. When Huzzey stresses the way "the power of the state played a pivotal role in creating agency and responsibility," we could understand this in terms of the state conceived as part of the kind of recipe for intervention Haskell stressed as a necessary precondition for mobilising collective action.[62] In this way, Haskell's original framework may be able to incorporate other important developments.

The language of complicity is more flexible, too. Huzzey rightly uses the term "national complicity" in referring to the kinds of claims I associate with causal contribution humanitarianism, but the power of the notion of complicity lies in the fact that a charge of complicity can be made even in the absence of any direct causal contribution.[63] Perhaps the most dramatic example of this is embodied in a common refrain of our post-Holocaust era: that silence or inaction in the face of abject suffering or atrocities amounts to complicity. Biafra may have been a turning point for Western moral consciousness here too, in its important and perhaps surprising role in the emergence and deepening of public memory of the Holocaust. Heerten stresses how it was not simply that Holocaust memory informed public perception of the images coming out of Biafra but that the two co-constituted each other.[64] In the first decade following the end of the Second World War the Holocaust was not central to dominant understandings of Nazism and one could not invoke it with the same force as today. This began to change in the 1960s with the Eichmann trial (1961), growing attention to survivor's memoirs, and as the Six Day War (1967) generated fears of a "second Holocaust."[65] Images of emaciated bodies in Biafra then prompted many in Western Europe and the United States to fear an "African Auschwitz."[66] Linking the two in a speech delivered at a Hamburg Biafra rally in October 1968, Günter Grass stressed the special responsibility of Germans: "Not moralizing condescension, but the knowledge of Auschwitz, Treblinka and Belsen obligates us to speak out publicly against the culprits and accessories of the genocide in Biafra […] Silence—we had to learn that as well—turns into complicity."[67]

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62 Richard Huzzey: The Moral Geography of British Anti-Slavery Responsibilities, p. 138. I owe this point to Mark Greif. Richard Huzzey at various points stresses the way those arguing for the limits of moral responsibility often stressed the powerlessness of the British to effectively intervene against slavery outside certain spheres of effective action. See also Richard Huzzey's work on a later phase in British antislavery, when fighting the slave trade became a core element in extending the power of the British Empire. Richard Huzzey: Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain, Ithaca 2012.

63 I thank Dale Jamieson for pressing this point.

64 Lasse Heerten: "A" as in Auschwitz, "B" as in Biafra: The Nigerian Civil War, Visual Narratives of Genocide, and the Fragmented Universalization of the Holocaust.

65 Ibid., p. 265.

66 Ibid., p. 252.

67 Ibid., p. 262.

The increasingly powerful resonance of this thought, that inaction amounts to complicity, may have heightened the sense that the moral stakes had risen, giving new force to the felt need to act in the face of evils one is in a position to prevent. This brings us back to our starting point in the early 1970s, adding more context to both Singer's classic essay and the shifting role of Western non-governmental organisations in the aftermath of Biafra. In a striking confluence, while Singer was writing his defence of individual moral action at a distance, a group of French doctors was struggling with their own responsibility for distant suffering. Their sense that the horizon of moral concern was expanding to encompass the globe led them to seek out new modes of direct action. At a meeting in Paris in December 1971, they agreed to form *Médicins Sans Frontières* as a kind of "medical strike force" that could mobilise quickly and bring emergency medical care anywhere in the world.[68] Bernard Kouchner and other like-minded Red Cross doctors who had volunteered in Biafra objected to the Red Cross approach to neutrality, which mandated strict confidentiality in order to secure access to suffering populations.[69] The Red Cross had already been heavily criticised for their failure to speak out during the Holocaust, when they had knowledge of what was going on in the camps. Many have noted how this would have weighed heavily on Kouchner, whose paternal grandparents were killed in Auschwitz. Singer may have felt a similar moral weight as a child of Viennese Jews who fled Austria in 1938.[70]

One aim of this paper has been to put Singer's and Haskell's work in historical context and to consider the role played by a certain kind of humanitarian appeal—one focused on individual failure to act when one can—in their respective work. Another aim was to identify some of the limits to that kind of appeal by distinguishing it from appeals to the way one is already causally implicated in distant suffering. Finally, I also hope that engaging philosophy and history in this way might help make a case for the idea that historians and philosophers have much to gain from engaging one another in ways that could ultimately enhance our understanding of the nature and history of transnational humanitarian action.

68   Peter Redfield: Life in Crisis: The Ethical Journey of Doctors Without Borders, Berkeley 2013, p. 55.
69   While this is part of the founding mythology of the organisation, the line from Biafra to *Médicins Sans Frontières*' embrace of the principle of witnessing is less than straight. See ibid., p. 56.
70   While some of his relatives escaped, his grandfather died in a concentration camp. See Peter Singer's reflections on his grandfather in: Pushing Time Away: My Grandfather and the Tragedy of Jewish Vienna, New York 2003.

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