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Should I (Legally) Be My Brother's Keeper?

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The purpose of WMU's Center for the Study of Ethics is to encourage and support research, teaching, and service to the university and community in areas of applied and professional ethics. These areas include, but are not restricted to: business, education, engineering, government, health and human services, law, media, medicine, science, and technology.

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SHOULD I (LEGALLY) BE MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?

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University of California, Irvine

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Should I be legally as well as ethically obligated to be my brother's keeper?

Should I be required, under threat of criminal penalty, to give up my sunbathing and dive into an icy lake to rescue a floundering swimmer, a task I am eminently able to accomplish? Should I be coerced by the same legal threat to warn a lone blind man, proceeding without a cane, that he is on the verge of plunging off the edge of a cliff to his certain death?

Cases such as these are not notably arguable matters in ethical terms. A person with any pretension to human decency ought to feel compelled to proffer assistance when he or she can do so with such little cost. Whether the criminal law should insist on such behavior and punish failure to so act, however, is a different and more complicated matter.

English and American law traditionally declare that I ought not to be burdened and bothered with the responsibility to aid another. As Peter Glazebrook notes: "...an able-bodied Englishman may with impunity watch a young child whose care he has not undertaken drown at his feet in a foot of water." The operative principle of American law was cold-bloodedly set forth by the Chief Justice of the New Hampshire Supreme Court almost a century ago:
Suppose A, standing close by a railroad, sees a two-year-old babe on the track and a car approaching. He can easily rescue the child with entire safety to himself. And the instincts of humanity require him to do so. If he does not, he may perhaps justly be styled a ruthless savage and a moral monster, but he is not liable in damage for the child's injury or indictable under the statutes for its death.  

An exception exists if the bystander has made an initial effort to assist; then he must carry through. He must also help those with whom he has a preexisting relationship, such as a spouse or kin; and those to whom he owes a contractual duty. This territory of obligation has persistently been widened by American appellate courts, but the fundamental ground rule prevails: I am not to be legally forced to concern myself with the woes of others, even when I am able to do so easily.

The legal doctrine in the United States is that a person compassionate or foolhardy enough to
intervene becomes liable thereafter for the consequences; absent such intervention he remains juridically unassailable. Take, for instance, the Zelenko case\textsuperscript{3}, in which a woman collapsed in Gimbel Brothers department store in New York City. She was carried to the store infirmary and left there unattended for six hours. When she died, her heirs sued the store and recovered. The appellate court noted that the store and its employees had owed the woman "no duty at all" and "could have let her be and die." Responsibility was assumed by the store only because of its "meddling in matters with which legally it had no concern."

A few statutory exceptions do exist to this laissez-faire approach. Since 1972, Vermont has demanded that bystanders intervene. Its criminal code states that "a person who knows that another is exposed to grave physical harm shall, to the extent that the same can be rendered without danger of peril to himself or without interference with important duties owed to others, give reasonable assistance to the exposed person unless that assistance or care is being provided by others." Those who follow this prescript are to be exempt from civil liability unless their action constitutes gross negligence or unless they
anticipated being paid for what they did. Minnesota has enacted a similar law, while more recently, Massachusetts decreed that persons on the site must report crimes of violence, and Rhode Island declared that they must notify the authorities of crimes of sexual assault. These last two legislative acts came in the wake of a notorious 1983 episode in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in which a woman was raped by at least four men over the course of an hour, while bystanders failed to intervene or to notify the authorities.

The major arguments favoring a hands-off approach to intervention are:

(1) Precise enunciation of a legal obligation to rescue is a feckless endeavor. A century ago, for instance, Lord Macaulay, in discussing his proposed draft of the Indian penal code, asked whether a medical specialist should be required under threat of criminal liability to travel from Calcutta to Meerut if he alone could save a dying patient, and it could be shown that he has ample time and resources to undertake the journey. Similarly, Richard Epstein questions whether, if a strong swimmer is to be held criminally liable for failure to make an easy rescue, another person will be similarly liable for failure to donate $10 to African relief when he is substantially
certain that the money will prevent a death through starvation.4 Law professors have been particularly imaginative in concocting permutations and combinations of hypothetical circumstances that should or should not be included in a satisfactory law. Drafting such a law, some argue, poses a task beyond satisfactory resolution.5

(2) Attaching a criminal penalty for the absence of altruism might redefine such behavior and thereby diminish the number of what once had been regarded as purely selfless actions.6

(3) Some libertarians maintain that duty-to-rescue laws are "an exalted form of socialism,"7 and that "it is a form of slavery to make one man serve another."8

(4) Statutes demanding intervention, it is claimed, would open up untoward opportunities for false prosecutions. In France, for instance, a man who had shot another was convicted both for willful wounding and for failure to provide aid.9 Even more disconcerting was the conviction in the same country under its failure-to-aid law of a surgeon who refused to perform a caesarean operation on the dead body of a woman eight-months pregnant.10
(5) Laws proscribing assistance to those in need would encourage bystanders to interfere officiously and ineptly in situations where they ought to remain passively on the sidelines. 11

(6) From the viewpoint of the administration of criminal justice, it would prove difficult to sort out the true malefactors if a considerable number of persons, such as the 38 apathetic onlookers in the notorious Kitty Genovese case, could in some degree be implicated. How under such circumstances should responsibility and criminal blame be fairly assessed?

(7) The tort implications of intervening behavior pose dilemmas that make statutory action questionable. Should, for instance, a person rescued from drowning be liable for the support of the family of her rescuer if he drowns while saving her? Should a doctor who fails to provide aid be liable to the second doctor who contacts a disabling disease when she subsequently offers assistance? 12

Besides the foregoing issues, Antony Honoré senses in the age-old Anglo-American legal position regarding the law's indifference to assistance for those in jeopardy "a certain pride in the irrational, incalculable depravity of the law." 13 But the most fundamental ethical argument against criminalizing
failure-to-rescue has been stated by Herbert Fingarette, who draws a sharp distinction between personal morality ("my soul") and legal demands (Caesar's affairs) in the following terms:

...whether my soul is saved or not is none of the state's business. Let Caesar regulate his own affairs: keeping the public order and the public well-being. My soul is my affair. This was Jesus' teaching; and it is also central to our political tradition.¹⁴

A contrary legal tradition, however, exists throughout Europe. The Russian Criminal Code of 1845 was the first declaration by a major Western jurisdiction of criminal liability for failure to assist those in need. It was followed by similar provisions in the criminal codes of Tuscany (1853), the Netherlands (1881), and Italy (1889).

The present French provision on duty-to-rescue nicely illustrates the ethical ambiguity that can be associated with such statutes. Under pressure in 1941 from the German occupation authorities, who had killed fifty hostages as reprisal for the murder of a
German officer, and who wanted French citizens to report resistance activities, the Vichy government decreed punishment for two kinds of offenders: (1) those who failed to inform on would-be-criminals, and (2) those who failed to bring or summon aid for one in peril, if affirmative action did not involve risk to the rescuer or to third parties, and if the failure to act was causally related to the death or serious harm of the imperiled person. The law was said to have been unevenly applied, possibly because of the distrust of German motives. But its second section was reenacted after the liberation of France. The new statute, however, dropped the provision that required serious bodily harm or death before criminal liability attached to the failure to act (Laws of 1945, Penal Code, art. 63, s. 2). Similarly, the Germans retained their failure-to-aid law, enacted by the Nazis in 1935, though the phrase that the statute reflected the "social solidarity of the people" was excised.

The French statute often has been invoked against physicians who do not respond to calls from those seeking emergency aid. André Tunc, summarizing more than two decades of experience with the law, notes that "in France, at least in my
opinion, the law...acts as an incentive to everybody to behave like a Good Samaritan," though he points out that it would be interesting to know the facts behind the numerical reports, which at the time he was writing listed about 65 convictions annually, almost all of them involving prison terms.16

A CASE OF FATAL FORNICATION17

Portugal, uncharacteristically for a European nation, did not include a duty-to-aid provision in its criminal law until 1982. Its statute now mirrors that of France and Germany, though an earlier draft had been more demanding, insisting on intervention from anyone who was "in a position to prevent a criminal offense without severe risk to himself, or without omitting a duty of equal or greater importance." This proposal was softened in the face of complaints by the law revision commission that it was "too broad," and "contrary to the prevailing ethical concepts of the country."

To learn how the new law operates, and partly in response to Tunc's call for case study material, in 1987 I sought detailed information in the first half dozen episodes that had been prosecuted. All but two had involved traffic matters, and primarily represented
an early attempt to determine how the law might mesh with hit-and-run statutes. [In the United States, it might be noted in passing, hit-and-run statutes run roughshod over the constitutional protection against self-incrimination in the Fifth Amendment. They do so on the patently flimsy ground that the privilege of driving carries with it a reciprocal duty not to leave the scene of an accident that you have caused.]¹⁸

These are the details of the most notable Portuguese failure-to-aid case to the time: On February 17, 1984, in a hamlet with perhaps 100 residents, located near the city of Alcobaça, a 65 year-old man invited to his house a 21 year-old woman who lived nearby. The man, a retired carpenter, was well-off by village standards. A hip operation had left him unable to dress or undress himself. The young woman was very poor, unattractive, and not very bright.

The incapacitated man and his visitor obviously agreed to some sexual arrangement. His pants now off, the man suddenly became ill, and then fainted. The woman, according to the court report, "was perfectly aware that his condition was serious." She took the unconscious man's wallet, containing a small amount of money, a postal money order, and
his identity card. She subsequently burned the card. On her way out of the house, the woman also stole some food from the refrigerator. As she was walking back to her own house, she met a person who would later testify that she never mentioned the condition of the victim. The victim was found by a neighbor, who had noticed the door of his house open, and went to investigate. The man was taken to the hospital, where he died four days later from the brain hemorrhage he had suffered.

The offender was identified when she tried to pass a bill in the village's only store. It was a crudely-printed facsimile bank note of a kind sometimes sent to people with advertisements, and the victim was known to have had it in his wallet. The court imposed the sternest sentence for violation of the failure-to-aid law, though it carried a maximum of only one year, compared to the three-year maximums for the other offenses charged--theft, and destruction of an official document (the identity card). The composite sentence was payment of 30,000 escudos (about $200) or 131 days in prison; payment of court costs; and restitution of 10,000 escudos to anyone entitled to make a claim.

The fact situation in this Portuguese case resembles in some regards events surrounding the
death of Nelson Rockefeller, the former Vice President of the United States. Rockefeller, 70 years-old, died of a heart attack in January 1979 while in the company of a young woman in his New York apartment. She waited for an hour before telephoning a friend, who in turn called the police. Since the family refused to permit an autopsy, it never was established whether Rockefeller's life might have been saved by a more timely call for help. Newspapers took what was an obviously prurient interest in the case, leading The Nation to pinpoint a significant ethical ingredient of the episode: "The real issue," The Nation insisted editorially, "has to do with whether public figures have a right to minimal private lives or, in this case, to a private death." Details of the Rockefeller case, it was insisted, involved a "minimalist zone of privacy." 19

Should failure-to-aid, as represented by the Portuguese case and the Rockefeller experience, dictate that an ethical principle be translated into a legal imperative, or should considerations of privacy and personal choice be allowed to prevail? The victim, of course, has no opportunity to record a retroactive opinion, but presumably in the overwhelming number of cases, he would like to get
as much help in as timely a manner as possible, despite the price his reputation may have to pay. The to-be-offender undoubtedly would prefer in most instances to protect her "good name," and might argue that the emergency was not of her own creation, and therefore ought not be her responsibility; or, if it is, she ought at least to be allowed to retain her anonymity. And, more basically, there must remain some doubt about whether the behavior of the participants would have been altered by existence of a criminal statute demanding that aid be provided.

The more relaxed moral ethos of our day mutes somewhat one issue involved in these particular kinds of cases; celebrity and fortune rather than shame and humiliation seem to await the Donna Rices and Jessica Hahns of today, if not the Gary Harts. All told, the chance to save a life undoubtedly should be given precedence over the opportunity to hold private affairs private.

BALANCING ETHICAL AND LEGAL CONCERNS

My field work indicated that the relatively recent Portuguese law requiring persons to provide aid in emergencies when they might reasonably do so without undue danger to themselves seemed to be
quite workable; and the evidence indicated that it has not been used for nefarious purposes, though, as the examples from France indicate, that potentiality certainly inheres in any failure-to-aid law.

The other ethical and legal objections noted earlier might be met by the following points:

(1) Legal analysts make their living and their reputations by ingeniously locating reasons why something won't or shouldn't work, and why what seems reasonably simple is a good deal more convoluted than people might otherwise imagine. European jurisdictions uniformly, and for significantly long periods of time, have found that penal laws punishing failure-to-aid are workable provisions.

Nobody, Lord Macaulay notwithstanding, would desire to criminally fault the physician who failed to undertake the journey from Calcutta to Meerut, however unencumbered he might be at the moment. If the same doctor refused to offer assistance to a person bleeding to death as a result of an automobile accident within sight of his front window, because he did not want to interrupt a dinner party, many of us might believe that he ought to have to answer to the criminal law for such callousness. John Kleinig has aptly noted that omissions under law
constitute a restricted subclass of nondoings. Omissions are attached to omitters, he points out, in a way that mere nondoings are not: we do not blame Prince Charles or Sophia Loren or an isolated Eskimo for the failure to rescue the victim outside the doctor's window, but only the person who sensibly could have rendered aid.\textsuperscript{20}

(2) That imperatives imposed by the threat of criminal prosecution would eviscerate the moral grandeur of altruism, and that such statutes might diminish the number of altruistic actions, seems far-fetched and quite unlikely. Ethical actions performed anonymously, with no prospect of reward and no likelihood of condemnation--actions such as those of the biblical Good Samaritan (\textit{Luke} 10:29-36)--are devoutly to be desired, but the carrot and stick of legal standards are precisely useful where the norms of the society begin to fail. If nothing else, a failure-to-aid law indicates the kind of behavior that a society endorses and the kind of indifference to others that it deplores.

(3) To say that such laws do disservice to liberty and force humans to subordinate their individuality to the requirements of others is to repudiate the interdependent nature of all human
existence. As A. D. Woozley has noted: "Any new law at all is some restriction on liberty, but not all restrictions are threats to it." Laws demanding responsible action in emergencies, as Kleinig notes, are concerned with the harm that comes from "eroding those fundamental social relations on which our individual welfare ultimately depends."

(4) All laws can be abused, but there seems no reason why a failure-to-aid statute would be applied malevolently and unreasonably any more than any other statute is so used. That Al Capone was handed a draconian sentence on an income tax evasion charge because the government was unable to nail him for his more barbaric acts is hardly an argument against the imposition of criminal penalties for tax fraud: it only warns that power can and will be abused, and that it is necessary to monitor the use of power as best as possible so that such abuse is minimized.

(5) That a failure-to-aid statute will turn us into a nation of inept meddlers and vicious vigilantes also appears to represent more of a sophistical point than a realistic assessment of the impact of a law that seems at most likely to have a marginal (though important) impact on the way people behave, and a
strong impact on the way that the social system presents itself, setting out those things for which it stands.

(6) Sorting out malefactors is a task that the criminal justice system routinely undertakes, and there is no reason to anticipate that it would have much difficulty in doing the same under a failure-to-aid law. Take the Genovese case, for example. The crime took place in Kew Gardens, on the outskirts of New York City, at about 3 o'clock in the morning on March 13, 1964. Ms. Genovese was knifed in the back as she tried to run from her automobile to the shelter of a nearby apartment building entryway. She screamed: "Help me! Help me! Oh, God, he's stabbed me." A neighbor leaned from his window and yelled: "Let that girl alone!" The assailant turned and ran from the scene.

Kitty Genovese then staggered about thirty yards, seeking sanctuary inside one of the nearby doors. Ten minutes passed before her assailant returned to the site and began to hunt down his victim. When he finally located Ms. Genovese, he slashed her brutally with his knife, then raped her.

Of the 38 persons later located who admitted having heard her cries for help, the most culpable clearly was a male friend of the victim who apparently
had stood at the top of the stairs and had seen her killed, without doing a thing. He thereafter telephoned friends asking their advice, and finally walked across the building rooftop so that he could use another person's telephone to call the police, because he wanted to avoid being identified and involved. The murderer, when later apprehended, was asked how he had dared to return to the scene after fleeing it: "I knew they wouldn't do anything," he said. "People never do."23

From a prosecutor's viewpoint, it would seem reasonable to go after the most egregious violators, especially since an especially strong element of the law being invoked is its character as an ethical statement.

(7) Finally, as with the criminal law, courts and juries have sufficient experience and wit to sort out the tort implications of diverse scenarios that could be involved in passage of a duty-to-aid law. There may be transient difficulties and tinkering with details may be required, but the issue hardly seems so insurmountable that it ought to scuttle what otherwise would be a desirable translation of an ethical matter into a legal statement.
CONCLUSION

Whatever its roots--whether they are planted in the soil of capitalism or the individualist ethos of the frontier--it seems that the indifference of American criminal law to failure-to-aid represents an outdated doctrine. That the law has not been altered so that it conforms more closely with ethical dictates probably is a consequence of inertia as much or more than any deeply-held ideological values. Some feminist jurisprudents now insist that the no-duty-to-aid position represents a quintessential example of a masculine attitude that is "devoid of care and responsiveness to the safety of others," and unresponsive to "other's needs and hurts." Like many other chauvinistic doctrines built upon toughness and self-reliance, they regard this one as anachronistic.

From the evidence available, there do not appear to be overriding practical objections to enactment of failure-to-aid criminal provisions in Anglo-American law. Nonetheless, it is obvious that the drafters and the enforcers would need to exercise due care to make certain that such laws produce as much good as possible, with a minimum diminution of an individual's right to protect himself or herself
from a criminal label when the omission occurred for
decent, or at least arguably decent reasons. Henry
Foster's rule-of-thumb seems an appropriate
guideline: "only egregious examples of wanton
indifference should be subject to the law's clumsy
sanctions." All matters considered, there seems
little doubt that failure-to-aid laws make reasonable
ethical demands upon what, in the evocative French
phrase, constitutes "égoisme excessif."
NOTES


2. Buch v. Amory Manufacturing Co., 44 Atl. 809 (N.H., 1898)


17. I am deeply obligated to Maria Rosa Almeida, tecnica superior do Gabinete de Estudos e Planeamento, Ministerio do Justica, Lisbon, for her help with my work in Portugal, and to my son-in-law, Adrian Fernandes, for translating during our interviews with people involved in the case described in the text.
18. See, for example, People v. Graham, 118 P.2d 256 (California, 1941).


Biography

Gilbert Geis is Professor Emeritus, Program in Social Ecology, University of California, Irvine. He has been a visiting professor at Sydney University Law School, and a visiting fellow at Harvard Law School and the Institute of Criminology at Cambridge University. He has received research awards from the American Society of Criminology (Sutherland Award, 1985); the American Justice Institute (McGee Award, 1989); the Western Society of Criminology (Tappan Award, 1980); and the National Organization for Victim Assistance (Schafer Award, 1980). He has written a dozen books and many articles on various aspects of criminal justice.

Professor Geis was a Visiting Scholar of Western Michigan University in October of 1987 under the sponsorship of the Criminal Justice Program.
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         2:00 p.m., Faculty Lounge, Bernhard Center
         "Surrogate Motherhood: The Michigan Legislation"

Jan. 23  Richard Gull, Philosophy, University of Michigan, Flint
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Feb. 20  Ferdinand Schoeman, Philosophy, University of South Carolina
         7:30 p.m., 1010 Fetzer Center
         "Privacy and Group Process"

Feb. 21  Ferdinand Schoeman
         4:00 p.m., 3020 Friedmann Hall
         "Cognitive Limits and Moral Heuristics: A Critique of Moral Theories" Department of Philosophy Colloquy
3:00 p.m., International Room, 205 Bernhard Center
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Mar. 1  Milton Fisk, Philosophy, University of Indiana
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"Marxism and Justice"

Apr. 7  Joseph Tolliver, Philosophy, University of Arizona
3:00 p.m., Faculty Lounge, Bernhard Center
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May 3  Benedict Paparella, Philosophy, Villanova University
       7:30 p.m., 105 Bernhard Center
       "A Code of Ethics for Multi-National Corporations"

May 11  Faith Gabelnick, Honors College Dean, WMU. Gene Grochowski, M.D., Nephrology and Hypertension, Kalamazoo. Lori Holmes, Director of Family Services, Kalamazoo. Marie Hungerman, Philosophy, Nazareth College. James Jaksa, Communications, WMU.
       3:00-5:00 p.m., 215-216 Bernhard Center.
       Panel on: "Habits of The Heart: Ethical Implications"

May 17  Heinz Luegenbiehl, Philosophy, Division of Humanities, Social and Life Sciences, Rose-Human Institute of Technology, Terre Haute, Indiana
       3:00 p.m., Faculty Lounge, Bernhard Center.
       "Moral Courage and the Engineer"
May 24  Justin Schwartz, Degree in Philosophy and Political Science, Kalamazoo College.
3:00 p.m., Faculty Lounge, Bernhard Center.
"Philosophy, Politics and Nuclear War"

June 23  Ronald Arnett, Dean, Manchester College. Clifford Christians, Communication Research Center, University of Illinois (Urbana).
Richard Johannesen, Chair, Department of Communication Studies, Northern Illinois University.
Lea Stewart, Chair, Department of Communication, Rutgers University.
3:00 p.m., Faculty Lounge, Bernhard Center.
Panel on: "Issues in Communication Ethics"
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