

# Discussion

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Typically, economists are baffled when they try to understand humanitarian efforts. The reason is that economists assume individuals to have selfish rather than charitable motives. How do you understand or explain motives that are assumed not to exist? It is unfortunate that economists are without the tools for explaining so much of the world's activity.

Prof. Johnson has a well-chosen quotation from John Stuart Mill, who perhaps thought more deeply about humanitarian affairs than any other economist has for 100 years. This is a better-balanced quotation than the more familiar one from Henry Thoreau, so often quoted by people who dislike things humanitarian. **Thoreau** said:

If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life . . .

In varying degree Mills, Thoreau, and Johnson all have their guards up against do-gooders, and with reason.

But we have to be careful that we do not allow the sometime ineptitude of giving to cast a cloud on all forms of charity, or to be a rationale for choking back every urge to help those in need.

The subject has special interest to me. I was the first co-ordinator of the Food-For-Peace Program, enacted in 1954. I have personally inspected the operation of this program in a dozen foreign countries. I belong to that small group of people who have given away the most food in the world's history. There are some things that can be learned in such an experience, and I propose to share them with you, as I perceive them.

First, There must be merit to Public Law 480, Food-For-Peace. We have had it for a quarter of a century and have moved \$25 billion worth of farm products with it. The law remains pretty much in the form in which it was first enacted. One can't brush aside as irrational or counterproductive a piece of legislation that has stood up so well so long.

**Second**, It is harder to give something away successfully than it is to sell it. In this I agree with Johnson. The dangers are great. It is possible to build a bond of

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charity which is hurtful both to giver and receiver, a bond which neither the donor nor the recipient dares break. But it is also possible, by judicious giving, to save lives and to restore hope. In any case, it is not possible in the modern world for a wealthy nation, possessing an abundance of food, to stand idly by while large numbers of poor people starve in some other country. That may have been possible 100 years ago, but not now.

*Third*, Food-For-Peace has a number of objectives most of them selfish, as Johnson so well says. To the purist who wants his philanthropy undiluted, this is a blemish. But to the pragmatist this is a help. I do not fault the program because it serves two or three or four purposes rather than one. Humanitarianism is rare enough in this world so that if it can get a lift from motives that are esteemed less worthy, all but the idealist can be happy.

*Fourth*, We should not expect thanks for the food we give. It is best not to expect it because we are unlikely to get it. Briefly, of course, some thanks for alleviating a desperate situation, but not enduring thanks. Though the people we help may be poor, they nevertheless are proud. They regret being unable to help themselves; the fact of the gift makes obvious their dependent status. Few people are grateful to the giver who lifts up for all to see the fact of their dependence. The belief that the people in these poor countries want to be deeply and continuously dependent on us is a myth.

*Fifth and finally*, There are such limits on giving and receiving as to rule out humanitarianism as a way of solving the world's food problem. I agree with Johnson on this point. The relationship between the volume of giving and the benefit that ensues is in the form of a curve, not a straight line. At too low a level, the opportunity to help is foregone. At too high a level, dependency is created and disincentives occur. At some mid-level net good results. I think the volume we have settled on — now between \$1 and \$2 billion a year, is in the intermediate, helpful range.

In summary, I believe that any appraisal of international trade which limits itself to the private commercial trade and omits reference to unrequited transactions misses both the facts and the philosophy of the modern world. I commend those who set up this symposium for including the subject on the program: