

# Am I My Brother's Keeper?

*Michael D. Jackson*

The violence in Syria that every day forces tens of thousands of people from their homes and homelands, giving them no choice but to further risk their lives in seeking a place of refuge, is a violence those refugees can do nothing about, and we who observe their tragedy at a distance also feel powerless to prevent. Yet, though we live in countries where there is no war, we and our governments perpetuate a social violence against those refugees that masks its xenophobic origins with rationales as self-serving as those produced by the regimes that bomb, torture, starve, and stigmatize their citizens in the name of preserving law and order. Blaming refugees for their own misfortunes, reducing them to a single undifferentiated mass of alien otherness, and persuading ourselves that our own life and liberty would be in jeopardy were we to admit them into our midst, we apportion our compassion with discriminating care, mourning the loss of a single child whose body washed up on a Turkish beach while treating millions of others as potential criminals and usurpers. One moment in July 2015 captured the political and ethical crosscurrents of the crisis. During a televised discussion titled "Good Life in Germany," a young Palestinian called Reem told Angela Merkel in fluent German that she and her family, who had arrived in Rostock from a Lebanese refugee camp four years ago, faced the threat of deportation. "I have goals like anyone else. I want to study like them," Reem said. "It's very unpleasant to see how others can enjoy life, and I can't myself." The German chancellor responded by saying she understood, but that "politics is sometimes hard. You're right in front of me now and you're an extremely nice person. But you also know in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon are thousands and thousands and if we were to say you can all come ... we just can't manage it." As the chancellor went on to express the hope that quicker decisions would be made to determine which refugees could stay and which must return, she was interrupted by Reem's crying. "Oh, God," Merkel said, before stroking Reem's shoulder and telling her how eloquently she had presented her case.

The tension here between seeing the other in politico-legal or purely human terms reflects a tension between a hierarchical and egalitarian mode of defining our obligations to others. On the one hand, we refer to a distributive morality that makes obligation relative to status, social distance, or social identity; on the other, we invoke notions of common humanity, and beyond this our duty to other life forms and the earth itself. Thus, we are haunted by the question of what any one of us owes humanity in general and whether, as David Graeber argues, our sense of common humanity means that the principle of exchange not only operates among people who live in the same community, country, or family but in relation to distant strangers and even enemies, according to the baseline principle, "from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs." What, for example, do we owe refugees and migrants? Despite the fact that our laws of citizenship and our sense of nationality exclude them from entering our affluent world and receiving the benefits of it, is there some principle akin to David Graeber's baseline or mythic communism that transcends our legal and political ways of defining rights (Graeber



2011), and moves us to admit these strangers at our gates simply because they are human beings in need?

It would seem that we are always in a dilemma, caught between moral and legal, or emotional and political, ways of understanding our obligations to others. While the legal and political frameworks decree that migrants and refugees cannot freely cross borders, no matter how dire their plight, our hearts go out to these same people, and we feel obliged to do everything in our power to help them. A few months ago, after attending a conference in Basel, I took the opportunity to look up some old friends in Freiburg, across the Rhine.

That evening, on the train back to Basel, I found myself pondering Heidegger's comment on Dasein as always understanding itself "in terms of its existence—in terms of a possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself" (Heidegger 1962: 33), and of his image of a clearing (*Lichtung*), and of the spaces of light and illumination that sometimes appear in the darkness of our lives, moments when we can lower our guard and fully accept, and perhaps wholly embrace, the world in which we find ourselves thrown. As the train crossed the Rhine I made my way to the carriage door, ready to alight as soon as we pulled in to the main station. Two blue-shirted border guards (*Grenzwache*) were standing over a young African woman who was struggling to insert a tiny key in the padlock of her bulging suitcase. One of the guards held the woman's passport in one hand, and his cell phone in the other. Spelling out the woman's name, letter by letter, he then waited for a response from his controller. The other guard continued to observe the woman, now wrenching open her suitcase in the cramped space so that it could be rummaged through. I thought of the thousands of individuals risking death to cross the Mediterranean from Syria or West Africa, desperate to leave a place of darkness, danger, and despair and find their way into a promised land, a world of light. And I thought of how, by contrast, I could cross the Rhine without having to show my papers or explain myself. Was there not, perhaps, some price I should pay, not for the privilege I enjoyed but for the human suffering I had avoided? Perhaps the anthropologist might discharge this moral debt by thinking more critically about the discursive violence in conventional social-scientific ways of speaking and writing about others. Given the plethora of academic essays, white papers, and compendious monographs devoted to refugee issues, why are there so few studies that give voice to and work from the lived experience of refugees themselves? To what extent do we, in the countries of immigration, unwittingly reduce refugees to objects, ciphers, and categories in the way we talk and write about them, in roughly the same way that indifferent bureaucracies and institutional forces strip away the rights of refugees to speak and act in worlds of their own making? If migrants often transgress moral norms and act outside the law, then we who seek to understand the migrant must reorient our own thinking, and acknowledge the extent to which life interrupts, unsettles, and resists the moral assumptions and logocentric modes of discourse we tend to privilege in our desire to protect the status quo, govern the world, or render it intelligible.

## ■ REFERENCES

- Graeber, David. 2011. *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. New York: Melville House.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper and Row.