Many privileged and influential persons and governments hold that they have no weighty moral responsibility toward foreigners in desperate need. I have attacked this view elsewhere, arguing that we do have such a responsibility. Of those who accept a weighty responsibility toward needy foreigners, most advocate that more such persons be admitted into the richer states and that more be done to ensure that those already here gain equal citizenship with ourselves in the fullest sense. I will argue here that such advocacy is not a good way of discharging our responsibility.

This argument may be a little hard to understand, because I agree with what I say we should not advocate. I agree that the richer states ought to admit more needy persons and ought to give equal citizenship to foreigners already here. But I question whether we should expend our scarce political energy and resources on these issues. Rather than try to get our compatriots to support admitting more needy foreigners and to support equal citizenship for foreigners already here, we should instead try to enlist them for other moral projects with regard to which our mobilizing efforts can be much more effective. What these other moral projects are will become clear in due course.

For purposes of the present argument, I can take for granted a moral concern for needy foreigners, many of whom would like to be admitted into the rich countries. To get a sense of the real-life dimensions of this issue, we must ask: Who are the persons seeking admission? Why do they want to come? And what moral claims do they have on us?

The answers to the first two questions are familiar. Very large numbers of persons live under truly terrible conditions: desperately poor and without effective rights of any sort. Every now and then, one can learn about some such lives through the media. One can learn, for example, about the other side of the sex tourism advertisements — about the young girls and boys who, after being kidnapped, or sold by their parents, spend their teenage years enslaved in brothels in Bangkok or in Bombay or in any one of hundreds of cities in the so-called Third World. One can learn about the other side of those beautiful oriental rugs by reading about that...
little boy who was relinquished by his parents to settle a debt of $15 and who was then chained to a loom and forced to make carpets during every waking hour of his life. He escaped and tried to mobilize world public opinion in order to rescue other children forced into a similar fate. But his campaign did not last long: He was shot and killed in his native Pakistan still only twelve years old. One can read, finally, the latest Amnesty International annual report, detailing how some 150 national governments imprison and torture their political opponents.

We know at least vaguely that such things are going on, and this knowledge lends moral urgency to our conviction that the rich states have a moral obligation to take such people in, to rescue them from their dreadful situation. But before we act on this conviction, before we publicize it and try to win the support of our compatriots and governments, we should reflect upon two further facts.

The first further fact is the sheer extent of desperate need, which can be grasped by looking merely at the problem of global poverty. Some 20 million deaths per year — mostly female and mostly children — are attributed to poverty: “Nearly 800 million people do not get enough food, and about 500 million people are chronically malnourished” and about 1300 million people (24 per cent of humankind) live below the international poverty line — which is defined as “that income or expenditure level below which a minimum, nutritionally adequate diet plus essential non-food requirements are not affordable” and currently corresponds to an annual per capita income of ca. $75. With hundreds of millions falling significantly below this line, we can assume that the income of the poorest fifth (1100 million) of humankind is about 1/4 per cent of world income, or $50 per capita annually — while the richest fifth has over 90 per cent of world income, or $19000 per capita annually, nearly 400 times more than the poorest fifth. With regard to wealth, the disparity is even greater, because the poor tend to have much less wealth than annual income, while the rich tend to have much more wealth than annual income. The wealth of the richest five persons suffices to match the combined annual income of the poorest fifth, and the wealth of the richest 358 (the dollar billionaires) suffices to match the combined annual income of the poorest 45 per cent.

Two important lessons may be drawn from these amazing statistics — one piece of bad news and one piece of good news. The bad news is that the number of desperate foreigners whom the rich countries now admit every year, and also the larger number of desperate foreigners they might conceivably come to admit under the best of circumstances — these numbers are ridiculously small in comparison to the number of those who are in desperate need and would like to come. The good news is that, despite the huge number of the global poor, it would be quite possible to improve