FOUR HYPOTHETICAL CASES

1. “Suppose in 1930 the government of nation A undertook to provide non-military assistance to the government of nation B in the form of oil, gas, and other petro-chemical products. Suppose further that within a couple of years the government of nation B was in the hands of a virulent anti-Semitic faction eager to embark on ‘the final solution of the Jewish problem.’ Let us suppose that this involved the construction of extermination camps in which lethal poisons would be used in large quantities and that these poisons were to be manufactured from the raw materials being supplied by government A, a portion of which would be diverted to this new purpose. To make the argument simpler, let us assume that the government of nation B could not obtain these products from elsewhere as cheaply, as promptly, and in such large supply, as they could from the government of nation A. On the facts supposed, is it really conceivable that an adviser to the government of nation A, knowing all the facts, would think it morally permissible to recommend continuation of the foreign assistance? The only ground for such a view for such a view would have to be that the government of nation B intended to use these chemicals to violate the human rights only of its own nationals.” What would you advise?

— Hugo Bedau

2. “Suppose we have an Embassy in a country that practices apartheid, and that the Embassy employs local citizens. It would be wrong to let racist laws affect our government’s hiring practices, even if we make no attempt to alter the apartheid in that country. This is because racist policies are fundamentally at odds with our most basic views, and our government must be responsible for not allowing them to govern its own behavior. This is not to deny that forcing such consistency in our own practices might create difficulties, but these would be difficulties it would be seriously wrong not to face.” Do you agree or disagree?

— Douglas MacLean
3. “If some country prohibited the practice of Christianity, our government would still be bound in principle — to insist that our diplomats stationed there be free to practice any religion. It would be convenient to make sure that we sent non-Christian representatives of our government there, but we would presumably be prohibited by our own principles from doing this as a matter of policy. That would constitute unfair religious discrimination in our government’s hiring practices. Our government might have no obligations, however, to promise religious liberty in that other country, under their government, or even to demand such liberty for our own citizens who happened to be there voluntarily, in some private capacity.” Do you agree or disagree?

— Douglas MacLean.

4. “To argue by analogy, there is a generally strong presupposition against interference in the affairs of another family, but this presupposition does not preclude intervening to protect a battered wife. . . In [this] domestic case, private parties with no special authority can be justified in bringing pressure to bear to protect the wife and even, I think, in intervening physically to protect her if all else fails. People who know well what is going on but do nothing are justly criticized for failure to aid. The person who grossly neglects his family is appropriately subject to social pressure as well as to the force of law. I don’t know exactly what kinds of pressure third parties are entitled or required to use in such cases but surely they are required at least not to make things worse.” Do you agree or disagree with the analogy?

— Tim Scanlon.