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Is Global Poverty a Moral Problem for Citizens of Affluent Societies?

Harry van der Linden

At least one billion people in the developing world lack minimally adequate nutrition, health care, housing, and educational opportunities. Their poverty creates massive human suffering, especially among children: Ten million children under the age of five die yearly from preventable causes, while hundreds of millions of children in the Third World grow up cognitively or physically severely underdeveloped.¹ There are also at least one billion affluent people, mostly living in the wealthy industrial societies of the North, who have enough income to routinely discard many still usable goods. The gap between the affluent and the global poor has increased during the past few decades, whether it is measured in terms of private consumption, income, or wealth. One would expect that severe poverty in a world of abundance would constitute a moral challenge to the affluent, but in fact it hardly seems a serious ethical concern. Why so?

My purpose of raising this question is practical. Many ethicists have argued since the early 1970s that the affluent have a strong duty to alleviate global poverty and hunger.² Numerous aid organizations, such as UNICEF, CARE, and Oxfam, make moral appeals to the same effect, but with little success.³ Limiting my discussion to the world's wealthiest nation, it is a striking fact that U.S. citizens privately donate less than \$15 per capita to international development organizations.⁴ Moreover, they do not protest their government's minimal aid of around \$30 per capita.⁵ It appears, then, that little progress has been made in convincing affluent citizens that global poverty should be a high moral priority for them. Should we conclude that the endeavor is in vain or misguided? Should the effort perhaps be directed differently? We might be able to begin to answer these questions by examining some reasons that might account for the fact that affluent citizens seem so little morally concerned with global poverty.

In a recent essay, Rüdiger Bittner considers three explanations for the "astonishing phenomenon" that with regard to world hunger "morality has not managed to lead [affluent] people to try to turn things around."⁶ His explanations apply to the broader issue of global poverty. The first explanation is that people are immoral and do not care much about all the suffering caused by world hunger (or global poverty). The second explanation is that people in affluent societies are simply slow in understanding that global poverty is an urgent moral issue. The final explanation is that affluent citizens are

not moved morally by global poverty because it is not really a moral problem setting a task or duty for them. Bittner defends this explanation and maintains that the alleviation of world hunger is a political goal that politicians must consider to pursue. He seems to hold that citizens may seek to participate in debates about how important the alleviation of world hunger is as a political goal, but they need not to relate the issue to their moral lives.⁷ I will contest here the third explanation and conclude that the second explanation is more plausible.

Bittner's first reason for holding that global poverty is not a moral issue for the affluent is that an essential feature of moral actions is to aim at improving the lives of people who are close to us. The global poor are not close to the affluent in the North and so they are rightfully outside their moral territory or scope of compassion. On Bittner's account, morality is cosmopolitan not in the sense that we should be morally concerned with all human beings, but only in the sense that we must act on principles valid for all people.⁸

Bittner fails to offer a clear explication of "closeness" as determining the range of our obligations. He rejects that only people dear to us (social proximity) are close to us and argues instead that they only must be somehow part of our lives.⁹ Presumably, the most defensible claim in this regard is that our duty to assist others in great need as an act of beneficence is limited to people who are part of our political community. Surely, this claim can be contested by noting, for example, that such a schema of mutual assistance is only defensible as long political communities do not lack the resources to take care of their own citizens, but nonetheless this explication of "closeness" is not obviously mistaken. In *Living High & Letting Die*, Peter Unger argues that it is incompatible with our moral intuition that if we could save the life of a bleeding person by transporting him to the hospital at the cost of soiling the fine upholstery of our antique car, we ought to do so whether this person is located in an isolated area in our home country or a foreign country.¹⁰ He is right about our moral intuition here, but his example does not refute the moral significance of borders in that one is temporarily part of the mutual assistance schema of a foreign country when one visits that country. That borders do matter morally seems to stand behind the fact that although U.S. citizens privately donate less than \$15 per capita to foreign people, their total private charitable contributions are around \$700 per capita.¹¹ This suggests that people feel compassion for good causes, but primarily for those of their fellow citizens.

Granted that this type of prioritizing is not obviously wrong with regard to the duty of helping other people in need, it does not follow that it is defensible to see global poverty as not setting a moral task for the affluent. The duty to aid may be a duty of justice rooted in the fact that the affluent are at least partly responsible for the existence of global poverty. Philosophers have paid insufficient attention to this approach, but it is central to the recent work of Thomas Pogge. He argues that "a person's human rights are ... not only moral claims *on* any institutional order imposed upon her, but also moral claims *against* those (especially more influential and privileged) persons who collaborate in its imposition."¹² Now since the present global economic order systematically works against the global poor and the affluent benefit from and sustain this order, the global poor have a moral claim against the affluent. Thus Pogge concludes that the affluent

should seek to change the global economic order so that the interests of the global poor are promoted, while they must also in the meantime directly contribute to the alleviation of global poverty.¹³

Pogge explores several ways in which the global economic order disadvantages the global poor, such as through the current practices of international borrowing and resource extraction with the terms set by the privileged countries.¹⁴ Moreover, he contends that the affluent have a duty of justice to aid the global poor because they are the beneficiaries of an unjust history of colonialism and because they use most of the world's diminishing natural resources without compensating the global poor who use them hardly at all.¹⁵ It may be objected that these links of responsibility are too weak and diffuse to impose duties. Bittner maintains that a second reason for holding that world hunger is not a moral problem for the affluent is that it is not "imputable." In his view, moral discourse is only appropriate with regard to states or events that can be "imputed," i.e., credited or charged, to one or more specific agents.¹⁶ World hunger is non-imputable because "we do not have a clear understanding of who brought it about, or who is bringing it about." Bittner adds that morally sensitive persons may feel that their daily economic actions add to the problem, but they should not seek to morally evaluate their actions because "the effects of their... decisions on world hunger are obscure, and in any case ridiculously small." Moreover, it is unclear how they or others could act in such a way as to make a difference. In short, "nobody is clearly responsible [and] moral assessment won't thrive on such ground."¹⁷

Bittner goes empirically wrong by exaggerating the extent to which we lack an understanding of the causes of world hunger and poverty. He makes a normative mistake by seeming to hold that sharing responsibility means that there is no personal responsibility. Consider the role that white citizens played in sustaining apartheid in South Africa. The contribution of many individual whites to sustaining this unjust system was small and their contribution varied, but this does not mean that they lacked responsibility for apartheid. Minimally, their responsibility meant that they had a prima facie duty to seek to change the system. Similarly, the affluent have a duty to change their system of economic privilege. They can do so by advocating political change and by supporting nongovernmental organizations that aim at assisting the global poor.

Pogge's argument for the duty to alleviate global poverty as a duty of justice can be further strengthened, I think, by noting that the affluent sustain an unjust global economic order not only as political citizens but also as workers and consumers. Transnational companies have a great impact on the condition of the global poor and people employed by these companies in the affluent societies need not to uphold the status quo but can instead seek to change corporate conduct in the developing world. Affluent employees can report on how their company may act environmentally destructively in the developing world, fail to provide safe labor conditions, avoid taxation, etc. They may pressure shareholders into changing corporate policies and engage in organizing labor across borders. In disagreement with Bittner, it is often clear that the consumption choices of the affluent are linked to global poverty. Their search for good buys is linked to sweatshops, child labor, even slave labor, under-compensated resources, and

environmentally destructive huge monoculture plantations with unhealthy work conditions that destroy local agriculture. Due to past and present ecologically unsound consumption, the affluent consumers also place serious environmental constraints on the economic growth options of the developing countries.¹⁸ Admittedly, it is often not the case that the affluent have consumption choices available to them that are more favorable to the global poor, but consumers can press for political and economic change and compensate for their harmful choices in the form of supporting international aid organizations.

Global poverty, then, is a moral problem for the affluent. This leaves the question open whether global poverty is so low on the moral agenda of the affluent because they are immoral or because they are slow to grasp its moral significance. The former view is implausible in light of the fact that the affluent in the U.S. donate large sums to their fellow citizens. So the issue is that the affluent inadequately grasp global poverty as a moral challenge. Perhaps the affluent hold that there is no duty of beneficence to assist the global poor, but the lack of charitable contributions may partly be based on the fact that U.S. citizens vastly overestimate how much their government is contributing to development aid.¹⁹ Advocates of the global poor should shatter this illusion and other common misunderstandings such as that the alleviation of world poverty is plainly impossible due to costs or population growth.²⁰ However, the most promising approach seems to be to explore and divulge factually and conceptually the numerous ways in which the affluent are implicated in a wholly unjust world of growing inequality. Changing people's moral perception is an arduous task and it is to be expected that affluent people will only gradually come to morally question their comfortable lives, at least in absence of environmental or political disasters that might occur in the future. The immense human suffering at stake makes it a duty for moral philosophers to continue to work at, and even increase their efforts towards, this task.

Notes

¹ The facts about global poverty are regularly published by, among others, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the World Bank. For a summary of the most basic facts, see Thomas W. Pogge, "The Moral Demands of Global Justice," *Dissent* (Fall 2000), 37-43.

² These ethicists include Peter Singer, Henry Shue, Peter Unger, and Thomas W. Pogge.

³ Peter Unger notes that in 1993 the U.S. Committee for UNICEF appealed by mail to around 4 million selected potential donors and that only around 1% responded. See *Living High & Letting Die* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 7n.

⁴ On basis of reports by the American Association of Fund-Raising Counsel (AAFRC), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS), it can be concluded that recent total aid from private sources to foreign countries is at most \$4 billion per year. This is approximately \$15 per capita and obviously not all this money goes toward alleviating global poverty. For a more detailed discussion of the data of private giving to the global poor, see my "High Consumption and Global Justice," forthcoming in Kevin E. Dodson, editor, *Values in an Age of Globalization*.

⁵ During 2001 and 2002, USAID-Managed Economic Assistance was less than \$8 billion. See <http://www.usaid.gov>.

⁶ See "Morality and World Hunger," p. 24. In Thomas W. Pogge, editor, *Global Justice* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002).

⁷ See *ibid.*, pp. 26 and 30-31.

⁸ See *ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁰ Unger, *op. cit.*, pp. 35-36.

¹¹ Total charitable giving for 2000 was \$203 billion. Individuals contributed \$152 billion; the remainder came from bequests, foundations, and corporations. Only \$2.7 billion went to "international affairs." See <http://www.aafrc.org>.

¹² "Human Rights and Human Responsibilities," p. 166. In Pablo De Greiff and Ciaran Cronin, editors, *Global Justice and Transnational Politics* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002).

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 170-71.

¹⁴ See *ibid.*, pp. 171-72. See also Pogge, “Priorities of Global Justice,” pp. 19-21. In Pogge, editor, *Global Justice*.

¹⁵ See “Priorities of Global Justice,” p. 14. For a more detailed discussion, see Pogge, “A Global Resources Dividend,” pp. 507-10. In David A. Crocker and Toby Linden, editors, *Ethics of Consumption* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

¹⁶ “Morality and World Hunger,” p. 28.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

¹⁸ For a more detailed discussion of these points, see my “High Consumption and Global Justice.”

¹⁹ The “average American” estimates that 20% of the federal budget goes to foreign aid, while the reality is less than 1%. See *Foreign Policy* (September/October 2001), p. 34.

²⁰ The mistake should also be avoided of understating the costs of eliminating global poverty. It is misleading to claim that lives can be saved with very small costs, such as pennies for Oral Rehydration Therapy, vitamins, and the like. International aid organizations and even moral philosophers often make this claim. It ignores that there are costs of access and health care education and that long-term solutions require clean water, sanitation, agricultural development, etc. It also neglects that political conflict regularly negates the results of humanitarian aid.