



World Poverty and the Duty of Assistance

Our intrepid philosophical investigator **Grant Bartley** files a conference report.

The London School of Economics (LSE) is a complex of buildings hidden in the heart of London, sandwiched between Covent Garden, the lawyers' hive of Lincoln's Inn Fields, and the Strand (at the other end of which is Trafalgar Square). The LSE was Karl Popper's university, and in June it played host to a one-day UNESCO-sponsored conference on poverty put together by the Forum for European Philosophy.

The chairwoman started with these statistics: the richest 15% of the world's population control 80% of the world's product, while the poorest 17% together control 0.3%. She then pointed out that the top fifth of the world's population is 300 times richer than the bottom fifth. So typically, if you were to judiciously give away half your wealth to the world's poorest, you could make 150 people twice as well off... Moreover, thirty thousand people a day die of preventable causes – that is, of poverty. We in the rich world evidently have *some* sort of duty to those with much less than ourselves; but exactly why, who and how? Who caused this situation, and who's responsible for doing something about it? In the chairwoman's words, this conference was organised to consider the terms in which global poverty should be addressed.

The first speaker was the genial Professor Jonathan Glover. He said that the physical distance of the poor from the rich provides us with a defence mechanism to help us deny our moral responsibility. But it's a poor excuse: distance is irrelevant in terms of moral responsibility. It's rather that distance has an anaesthetising effect, contributing to the psychology of inaction. Another excuse for our inactivity is that we see the problem as insoluble or too big. Professor Glover compared responses to on-going poverty with the immediate generous response of the rich world to the Tsunami – a on-off problem requiring a one-off response. There's also a hint of moral supremacism over poverty. The Tsunami could be seen as an act of God or Nature on innocent victims; whereas perhaps there is still a residual feeling that the poor are responsible for their own poverty. It's their responsibility, not ours.

But the poor have *humanitarian claims* on us – on the basis of a human recognition of other people's suffering – and also *claims of justice*. Glover claimed that we owe the poor world compensatory justice for instance, as much of the developing world's poverty can be traced to our exploitation, past and present, and our trade protectionism. One example Glover gave was that half the cut flowers bought in British supermarkets come from Kenya, lavishly using up that country's scarce water supplies to grow them: "We are exporting drought" he explained. There are also justice claims on those who have the power to ameliorate suffering simply *because* they have that

power. In fact there should be moral outrage at all the preventable suffering, Glover said, quite reasonably.

He gave the example, also attributed to Peter Singer, that if you were walking along a riverbank and saw a child drowning, you would automatically feel a duty to try to rescue that child. Why should you feel less duty to rescue those dying from poverty, provided you can do something about it – which we all can? Professor David Miller, in a later speech, countered that the drowning child example was not a good analogy when considering our duties towards developing countries. The situation is more like one where there are several people walking along beside a river continually in which many people are drowning. You cannot rescue everyone, so you must be selective; nor are you the only person who could possibly offer help. Plus, a drowning child might not yet be self-responsible (a 'moral agent'), whereas poor adults do have responsibilities to themselves. So the 'duty issue' becomes a question of how responsibility is to be distributed among everyone who has a share in it.

One suggestion Glover extracted from considering our moral duty is that none of us can do everything we possibly *could* do, but that we should try to "live life at the moral maximum". In the extreme this would mean giving away your wealth and doing good works until you're as poor as the people you're trying to empower. Glover called this "telescopic philanthropy" after a phrase Dickens used to describe Mrs Jellyby, a character in *Bleak House* who behaved like this. But you are also an 'end', not merely a 'means': you ought to look after yourself as well as others. Also, we have the strongest responsibilities to those closest to us. Imagine saying to your young daughter, "You're not having any birthday presents this year darling, we're giving the money to Oxfam." That would show a distinct lack of responsibility and love. So, with sensible consideration, the 'moral maximum' principle reduces to living as benign a life as is psychologically sustainable to you, so that your morality and good works doesn't drive you to madness. What is 'psychologically sustainable' must be a vague and arbitrary, rather than a sharply-defined and absolute zone. We would also wisely match our charity activity with our skills and aptitudes, "working with the grain of our nature". Academics and thinkers, Glover suggested, may be better employed in consciousness-raising than in fund-raising. Unfortunately, and on the contrary, he thinks that not enough philosophers are engaged with these issues.

Each session was opened to questions from the audience. The first person to stand up and make a point was a representative of the Jubilee Debt Campaign, the organisation behind the Live 8 concerts. She urged perseverance: although a lot had been achieved, still a lot more needs to be done: "Keep push-

ing!" A later contributor from the floor made the promising suggestion that there should be a global 'poverty awareness day'.

Dr Linda Yueh, an economist, next spoke about China's phenomenal growth, lifting something like 400 million people out of absolute poverty in the last three decades, although inequality is also increasing. (Absolute poverty means a poverty that is life-threatening.) Incomes have been doubling every eight years, compared to about every thirty years in the West. Contrary to received wisdom about development, this growth was not due to foreign aid, investment or trade, but due to internal government policies, such as providing productivity incentives to farmers. Reforms to stimulate economic growth were experimented with locally before wider adoption. Rural industrialisation schemes prevented urbanisation, and rules restricted movement. It was only with the increase in global trade in the 90s that there has been substantial urban poverty, with between 70 and 200 million migrating to coastal export-processing regions, which control three-quarters of GDP.

Providing a contrast with the Chinese case, Professor Jan Breman, a sociologist from Amsterdam, spoke about his field-work in poor rural villages in India. There is no trickle-down effect of wealth here. The poor agricultural workers, "the biggest working class in the world," have been robbed of their common land and live in extreme poverty, with one set of clothes and no possessions, barely able to survive on the equivalent to about fifty cents a day when they can get it (ie not in the monsoon season, and for less than half a year). They're kept out of public view and public thought. Meanwhile the "obscenely rich" land-dispossessing land-owners live in gated communities in the same villages, often with their own water-purification plants. Employers offering low wages gain from keeping the poor in poverty; and land-owners remain secure as long as the poor remain effectively powerless. Breman also said that the jargon of Social Darwinism is coming back in India: 'the poor are inferior, don't support them'. Meanwhile the gap between rich and poor is not just increasing, the rate of increase is accelerating. *Market fundamentalism* causes this: labour is over-supplied. So what is right ideologically?

Perhaps it was his first-hand experience of this extreme poverty, but I found Prof Breman to be speaking from his heart rather than just intellectually about the effects of poverty, and his words were all the more persuasive for that. Thus a truism such as "their poverty is a problem of distribution, not a problem of being unwilling or unable to work," carried weight and meaning. To him a duty of assistance springs simply from "our basic human equality"; but "we are witnessing the *denial* of the principle of equality". Breman further said that globalisation is irrational. For example, it has turned Europe into a rich fortress, "but will it be possible to *continue* to keep out the poor?" He called for good governance at the transnational level – in contrast to national politics always selfishly serving national interests. I agree that such a visionary development would surely mark an increase in maturity for human society.

After lunch there was a debate between a former World Bank representative and a former minister in the Ghanaian government. The man from the World Bank, Professor Paul Collier, was personable and jokey, an impeccable example of middle-class reasonableness and approachability, gently stress-

ing the unfairness of the inequality of wealth across the world. But his gentle personality was unfortunately something of a smokescreen obscuring the logical chicanery of his argument. I mean, he redefined the problem of poverty so that the obvious solution would automatically fit his free market preferences. I hoped I wasn't the only person to spot this manoeuvre.



Professor Collier set up the situation like this: the world can't so simply be divided between the rich and the poor. Instead there's the *richest one billion* and the *developing four billion*, then there are the *poorest one billion*. But the problem of the poorest one billion is not so much that they're in desperate poverty, he claimed: their problem is that compared to the developing four billion, their economies are stagnant, experiencing no growth and remaining in poverty, while the developing rest of the world catches up with us rich. Thus we must facilitate growth of the stagnant economies so that they will not be left behind the rest of the world. The best way to promote economic growth is to stimulate the market economies of these countries. So the problem of the poorest countries is really that they're not doing enough capitalism.

It sounds reasonable. But if you *define* the problem as a lack of economic growth, then *of course* the solution is going to be more economic growth! And 'economic growth' is defined here to mean 'growth in markets'. But the main problem of the poorest people is actually *not* that their economies aren't growing as fast as their neighbours – it's that they're *poor*: they don't have the resources they need for an adequate standard of living. Professor Glover said earlier that the problem with famine is not the lack of food in the world, but the lack of rights of access to food. So generally, to be poor *means* not having access to food, clean water, medical care and education, etc. When seeing the problem in *this* way (ie, as it really is), it's clear that market growth is not the core issue. The poor world needs more hospitals, schools, and infrastructures organised to facilitate access to all necessary resources. But, if the problem is not enough hospitals, the solution should surely be to focus on building more *hospitals* – not on building more McDonalds, Starbucks or sweat-shops. The point is, the problem of poverty is not *per se* the problem of a lack of economic growth: the problem of poverty is *poverty*, ie lack of access to resources. The way to finance the change *may* be to undergo market economic growth; but that is by no means the only possible approach. For example, the necessary finance to provide the necessary resources could equally be achieved through (neo-) Keynesian economics, that is, by gov-

ernment investment (John Maynard Keynes was also at LSE). Resource provision could theoretically also be funded through local co-operatives, or with help from charitable, religious or other organisations. The current obsession with promoting a global market growth agenda is frankly *irresponsible*, I believe, given the high pressure the market economic system is already putting on the environment. And, maybe half the rich world's population don't even *like* the work they're doing. Why should we want to export *this* system to others? We shouldn't just let the West's short-term, blunt, biased and bad understanding of economic expediency blind us about the social and ecological implications of our embracing of capitalist economics. In any case, it hasn't been demonstrated that market economic growth is even a *good* solution.

The former Ghanaian minister, Dr Ekwow Spio-Garbrah, said that the poor can be best helped by banking reforms, so that they can afford to borrow to invest in resources. He also made this memorable point: twenty years ago, it cost six bags of Ghanaian cocoa to buy one European car. Now it costs forty bags of cocoa to buy the same car. As he explained it, "poor countries are subsidising the life-styles of the rich by providing them with cheap commodities." Our consumer life-styles are evidently partly responsible for the continuing impoverishment of the developing world. He wanted instead to let Africa export while limiting imports. Aid, on the other hand, is "really an instrument of foreign policy," and "most of it goes into Iraq anyway," he claimed.

When questioned what should be done to most help the Ghanaian economy he said immediately, "End the Green Card lottery." A Green Card is official permission to live and work in the USA, and under the 'lottery' system a number of people are given this Card each year. He explained the process this way: the US government examines what skills it's lacking, such as doctors, nurses, scientists, engineers. It then puts ads in the newspapers of 'target' developing countries, advertising the Green Card lottery, but without explaining the criteria for the choice of who gets the card: everybody is invited to apply. But it's not really a lottery. It's set up to help fulfil the US's predicted economic needs: if more doctors are needed, the Card will be given to doctors. In this way the US systematically extracts intellectual capital from the countries who most desperately need their skilled people to help them develop their infrastructures. And in case we in Europe or elsewhere are feeling smug about not perpetrating this crime, we should consider how much we also are willing to extract skilled workers from developing countries to our benefit and their detriment. How many people working in our hospitals come from countries who desperately need medical skills?

After a break, Professor David Miller and David Mepham focused the discussion on who is responsible for global poverty. Prof Miller made the important distinction between responsibility for *causing* or perhaps *facilitating* global poverty (he called this 'outcome responsibility'), and responsibility for *dealing* with it, ie *sorting it out* ('remedial responsibility':



philosophers love jargon, they think it makes what they say sound official). These two types of responsibility do not necessarily define the same groups of people, but often they are linked: you made the mess, you clear it up. Prof Miller cited the approach of the German philosopher Thomas Pogge. The rich nations are remedially responsible because we are in a large part responsible for causing the mess, through the effects of colonialism, exploitation of resources etc. Domestic economic factors are largely determined by the international situation: so we should redesign the world economic order to stop our exploitation of the poor world, and we should also compensate for the damage we've already done. We also have a deal of remedial responsibility just because we do have the

power to change things. All of us in democracies are somewhat implicated by the behaviour of our governments: our votes and voices influence their decisions. By contrast, the poor cannot be remedially responsible for alleviating their own poverty, or they would presumably already be doing so.

David Mepham said that there's not just one model of success. He also asked why there isn't global justice like national justice: the policies of rich countries are a major part of the problem, but why should we be responsible just for 'our' people?

This echoed Prof Glover's point about distance being morally irrelevant. Mepham stressed that this is not to detract from the problems caused by indigenous corrupt governments and the people who support them, for example.

Mr Mepham's central point was that we should think more politically. For instance, the caste system in India is "institutionalised discrimination" where the rulers ignore the rights of the poor, keeping them poor: "Rights matter!" Although this is over-simplifying a complex situation, the overall point is still valid: that it's not just about aid and NGOs, but also about trying to change institutions and cultures. His final point I whole-heartedly agree with: that global society should aim to create a global welfare system of minimum entitlement. What else could it mean to be civilized in a globally-connected age? You heard it here first (probably).

Concluding remarks were given by Professor Leif Weiner, who treated us to a condensed history of geo-economics, in which nations experimented with a range of approaches before the capitalist countries with the rule of law solidly out-competed their rivals – so this must be the way ahead... But I'm sure this isn't the whole story. We haven't reached the end of history just yet.

Overall, I was glad to see philosophers engaging with one of the most serious problems of our time, seriously seeking to provide the intellectual foundations which will enable us to press forward in addressing global poverty wisely and well. Tackling global poverty is the responsibility of all of us.

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Grant Bartley introduces a meta-revolutionary approach to these and other issues in his 'forthcoming' book *The Meta-Revolution*. He is Assistant Editor at *Philosophy Now*.