

Introduction: World poverty and the duty of assistance

Shortly after the appearance of his early masterpiece *Political Argument* in the late 1960s, Brian Barry was asked why, in a book which discussed a wide range of questions facing contemporary society, from the justification of the state's coercive power to the fair distribution of income, he did not discuss the major moral issue of the day, namely, whether the use of nuclear weapons in all-out war could ever be justified. Barry responded "when the moral facts are obvious, there is no need for philosophy."

The moral facts about global poverty may seem equally beyond dispute. Most inhabitants of rich nations encounter the moral issues that stem from global poverty in two ways. First, if we regard as even roughly accurate the estimates of aid agencies of the cost of permanently alleviating or preventing one individual's poverty-related suffering, then we recognise that each of us is in a position to be able to meet the grave needs of distant strangers at moderate personal cost.

Second, we recognise that by partaking in the ordinary life of our societies, we are participants in a global political and economic system with a decidedly mixed record on poverty alleviation. In recent decades, this system has generated the knowledge, wealth and economic opportunities that have played a central role in lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. At the same time, it has left unfulfilled the basic needs of those with insufficient purchasing power, has maintained conditions conducive to the exploitation and oppression of many, and has led to serious environmental degradation.

In both cases morality's demands on us appear to be straightforward. Insofar as each one of us is in a position through acts of beneficence to significantly alleviate suffering at without having to sacrifice anything of comparable moral importance, each of us should do so. Furthermore, in our daily roles as consumers and producers, each of us should ensure that he or she does not become party—however indirectly and unintentionally—to oppression or exploitation. Nor should we participate in transactions that generate unreasonable risks of harm to others. Finally, as citizens, we should support improvements in the global political and economic system. All this seems obvious. There may be a place for drawing people's attention to the relevant facts, and for sermonising if people don't act as they know they should, but, following Barry's dictum, there seems to be no need for moral philosophy.

On closer inspection, however, a host of questions surround these three moral duties, which I will refer to as the duty to aid, the duty not to harm, and the duty to promote just global institutions.

Let us start with the duty to aid. How would I have to live to ensure that I only keep those resources for myself that generate benefits for me that are of comparable moral importance to the suffering of others that I could prevent by their alternative use? If I accept that the cost of saving others from deprivation is small compared to the cost of most of my daily enjoyments and needs, it would appear that the duty to aid would require me to completely change my life. I would have to devote my time, money, knowledge, and contacts to lessening the suffering of others, possibly to the point where I would be very badly off myself.

(This need not be the case, though: I would be permitted to keep what is necessary to sustain me in my good works, or even amass a huge fortune if this would eventually enable me to do more good. Warren Buffett, the world's second-richest man, was asked

to explain his decision to give way his billions to the cause of fighting global poverty and disease late in life, when he had given very little before. He replied: “I have always wanted to give my money away. But I was too good at making money. If I had given away my first \$50,000 many decades ago, it would have done far less good. Better, I thought, to keep reinvesting it until I could really make a difference.”)

This duty to aid is, in sum, extremely demanding. Is its demandingness a sign that our conception of it is flawed?

We may feel a pull to answer “yes” to this question that stems from nothing more than a desire to be free from the burden of guilt we would feel for acknowledging moral requirements that we suspect we will not meet. This pull should, of course, be resisted. Moreover, demandingness is itself not a sign that a duty is misconceived. After all, each of us recognises that respecting the duty not to kill an innocent stranger may be very demanding on occasion (say, when the stranger is ahead of us on a waiting list for an urgently needed life-saving transplant organ). And we also recognise occasions, such as the pursuit of a just war, in which it may be our duty to sacrifice ourselves for some greater good.

Nonetheless, legitimate questions have been raised about the way this duty to aid has been formulated. First, we face more than just a trade-off between the use of resources to further our personal projects on the one hand and the well-being of distant strangers on the other. For many people, a morally good life involves relationships with partners, family and friends. The demands of these relationships need to be weighed against the demands of the duty of assistance. Jonathan Glover explores this issue in his contribution to this forum (p).

Second, the way we have formulated the duty to aid does not consider two factors of moral importance: the causal process by which poverty has come about, and whether others are also in a position to help. Whether a person is remedially badly off due to his own well-informed, uncoerced choices, for example, or whether he is in this situation due to bad brute luck, may make a difference to the strength of his claims on our aid. Furthermore, some person may be remedially badly off due to someone else’s action, or due to an action of our own, and this too may be important to the extent of our duties to him. Finally, whether I alone am in a position to relieve someone’s suffering, or whether others are in an equally good, or even better position, may make a difference to my duty to aid this person. In sum, questions about who is responsible for creating certain bad outcomes, and who is in a position to improve them, may be relevant to the extent of a person’s duty of assistance. David Miller addresses these issues in his article (p).

What of our duty not to harm others or participate in relationships which enable some agents to harm others through oppression and exploitation? Undoubtedly, a significant share of the economic transactions that the ordinary citizen of a rich country enters into on a daily basis are relationships of this kind. The taxes paid on shoes made in China support an oppressive communist dictatorship; the Kenyan green beans purchased in the supermarket are fed with irrigation water on which local fishermen might have a greater claim. But wrong as it may seem to engage in such exchanges for our own betterment, we are also all familiar with an argument against withdrawing from them. As Linda Yueh discusses (p), notwithstanding all their undesirable consequences, economic systems in which exchanges of this kind figure prominently appear to be the single greatest contributing factor in the spectacular drop in absolute poverty in recent decades

in China. (The same may be said for many other countries.) It would, of course, be better if we could engage in economic exchanges with inhabitants of poorer nations without harming third parties or supporting undesirable regimes; but where we are faced with a choice between engaging in them or withdrawing from them (by substituting, for example, shoes made in Italy and green beans grown in Holland for their Chinese and Kenyan counterparts), it is not at all clear that withdrawal is morally preferable.

In the case of the duty to promote just global institutions, the need for further philosophical analysis arises from the fact that acknowledging the obvious injustice of current global institutions is only part of the job. The work of the Drop the Debt campaigners on the effects of the borrowing privileges of corrupt and oppressive elites, for example, has been crucial in identifying and remedying injustice. But in order to support the development of just institutions, we must be able to orient our actions by an idea of what a realisable and tolerably just global order would look like. The task of identifying this order is one which philosophers have of late taken up with gusto. To get a flavour of the debate, consider in very rough outline two positions recently defended by liberal philosophers. The first position, defended by Rawls in *The Law of Peoples*, requires that each country have economic institutions that enable all to have a decent life, and a government that respects basic human rights and that is legitimate in the eyes of its subjects. (It need not be a liberal democracy.) The task of wealthy nations is to enable societies without such institutions to acquire them. Once this is accomplished, only limited action to transform these societies into liberal democracies is permitted, and action to improve the lot of the poorer countries beyond the minimum necessary for a decent standard of living would not be required. The second position, defended by Charles Beitz in his pathbreaking *Political Theory and International Relations*, argues that justice requires the spread of liberal democracy and a global economic system (which may include international transfers) which maximally improves the prospects of inhabitants of the least developed nations.

In whatever way we qualify and develop it, however, the perspective on world poverty built around the three duties faces the following objection. The history of aid and development shows us, so this objection runs, that moral requirements that do not coincide with self-interest are generally weak motives for action. Our sense of justice is easily outraged by attention-grabbing cases, like the Tiananmen Square massacre, or the plight of Kenyan fishermen whose livelihood is disappearing as their lake is drained to irrigate our green beans. But if the course of action required to right injustice is hard to discern and difficult to implement, we rarely commit to it before our attention is diverted elsewhere. Similarly, our compassion is easily aroused by images of suffering; but it seldom remains powerful enough to engender a long-term commitment to expend significant resources on aid. Rather than relying on weak and fickle moral motives, we would do better, therefore, to trust in enlightened self-interest when designing strategies to deal with global poverty. Paul Collier, an economist with a distinguished career in development, issues this challenge in his piece (p).

In sum, each of the contributors challenges and amends the view formulated at the outset of this introduction. It was with the aim of eliciting such contributions, and discussing them with the general public, that the Forum for European Philosophy and the Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method organised the Conference on World Poverty and the Duty of Assistance in June of this year, from which the four

articles that follow were extracted. These contributions advance the tasks of formulating a viewpoint that gives the aim of eliminating poverty its proper place among our other goals, and of effectively orienting ourselves towards this aim in thought and action.