

ETHICS AND POVERTY

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THE ARGUMENT FOR AN OBLIGATION TO ASSIST

Suppose that on your way to have lunch with a friend you pass a shallow ornamental pond, and notice that a small child has fallen in and is in danger of drowning. Should you wade in and pull the child out? This will mean getting your clothes muddy, ruining your shoes—you do not have time to take them off—and missing your lunch; but compared with the avoidable death of a child none of these things are significant.

A plausible principle that would support the judgment that you ought to pull the child out is this: if it is in our power to prevent something very bad happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, we ought to do it. This principle seems uncontroversial. It will obviously win the assent of consequentialists (those who think we ought to do whatever would have the best consequences); but non-consequentialists should accept it too, because the injunction to prevent what is bad applies only when nothing comparably significant is at stake. Thus the principle cannot lead to the kinds of actions of which non-consequentialists strongly disapprove—serious violations of individual rights, injustice, broken promises, and so on. If non-consequentialists regard any of these as comparable in moral

significance to the bad thing that is to be prevented, they will automatically regard the principle as not applying in those cases in which the bad thing can only be prevented by violating rights, doing injustice, breaking promises, or whatever else is at stake. Most non-consequentialists hold that we ought to prevent what is bad and promote what is good. Their dispute with consequentialists lies in their insistence that this is not the sole ultimate ethical principle: that it is an ethical principle is not denied by any plausible ethical theory.

Nevertheless the uncontroversial appearance of the principle that we ought to prevent what is bad when we can do so without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance is deceptive. If it were taken seriously and acted upon, our lives and our world would be fundamentally changed. For the principle applies, not just to rare situations in which one can save a child from a pond, but to the everyday situation in which we can assist those living in extreme poverty. In saying this I assume that extreme poverty, with its hunger and malnutrition, lack of shelter, illiteracy, disease, high infant mortality and low life expectancy, is a bad thing. And I assume that it is within the power of the affluent to reduce such poverty, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance. If these two assumptions and the principle we have been discussing are correct, we have an obligation to help those in absolute poverty that is no less strong than our obligation to rescue a drowning child from a pond. Not to help would be wrong, whether or not it is intrinsically equivalent to killing. Helping is not, as conventionally thought, a charitable act that it is praiseworthy to do, but not wrong to omit. It is something that everyone ought to do.

This is the argument for an obligation to assist. Set out more formally, it would look like this.

First premise: If we can prevent something bad without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, we ought to do it.

Second premise: Extreme poverty is bad.
Third premise: There is some extreme poverty we can prevent without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance.
Conclusion: We ought to prevent some extreme poverty.

The first premise is the substantive moral premise on which the argument rests, and I have tried to show that it can be accepted by people who hold a variety of ethical positions.

The second premise is unlikely to be challenged. It would be hard to find a plausible ethical view that did not regard extreme poverty, with the suffering and deaths of both adults and children that it causes, not to mention the lack of education, sense of hopelessness, powerlessness and humiliation that are also its effects, as a bad thing.

If we can prevent something bad without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, we ought to do it

The third premise is more controversial, even though it is cautiously framed. It claims only that some extreme poverty can be prevented without the sacrifice of anything of comparable moral significance. It thus avoids the objection that any aid I can give is just “a drop in the ocean” for the point is not whether my personal contribution will make any noticeable impression on world poverty as a whole (of course it won't) but whether it will prevent some poverty. This is all the argument needs to sustain its conclusion, since the second premise says that any extreme poverty is bad, and not merely the total amount of extreme poverty. If without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance we can provide just one family with the means to raise itself out of extreme poverty, the third premise is vindicated.

I have left the notion of moral significance unexamined in order to show that the argument does not depend on any specific values or ethical principles. I think the third premise is true for most people living in industrialized nations, on any defensible view of what is morally significant. Our affluence means that we have income we can dispose of without giving up the basic necessities of life, and we can use this income to reduce extreme poverty. Just how much we will think ourselves obliged to give up will depend on what we consider to be of comparable moral significance to the poverty we could prevent: stylish clothes, expensive dinners, a sophisticated stereo system, exotic holidays, a luxury car, a larger house, private schools for our children . . . For a utilitarian, none of these is likely to be of comparable significance to the reduction of extreme poverty; and those who are not utilitarians surely must, if they subscribe to the principle of universalizability, accept that at least *some* of these things are of far less moral significance than the extreme poverty that could be prevented by the money they cost. So the third premise seems to be true on any plausible ethical view—although the precise amount of extreme poverty that can be prevented before anything of moral significance is sacrificed will vary according to the ethical view one accepts.

I will now consider three objections to this argument.

DOES AID REALLY DO ANY GOOD?

Some argue that we can't have any confidence that our donations to an aid organization will save a life, or will help people to lift themselves out of extreme poverty. Often these arguments are based on demonstrably false beliefs, such as the idea that aid organizations use most of the money given to them for administrative costs, so that only a small fraction gets through to the people who need it, or that corrupt governments in

developing nations will take the money. In fact, the major aid organizations use no more than 20% of the funds they raise for administrative purposes (and often considerably less than that), leaving at least 80% for the programs that directly help the poor, and they do not donate to governments, but work directly with the poor, or with grassroots organizations in developing countries that have a good record of helping the poor.

Measuring the effectiveness of an aid organization by the extent to which it can reduce its administrative costs is, however, a common mistake. Administrative costs include the salaries of experienced people who can ensure that your donation will fund projects that really help the poor in a sustainable, long-term way. An organization that does not employ such people may have lower administrative costs than one that does, but it will still achieve less with your donation. It is very important to give to charities that are effective in reducing extreme poverty, and its consequences. Fortunately there are now other organizations, specializing in the evaluation of organizations working to reduce extreme poverty, and they can help us find out which charities are truly effective.

There may still be some people who regard global poverty as a kind of black hole, into which we pour money. But we are making progress

GiveWell is one such organization. It has, for example, compared the cost per life saved of various organizations which work to combat the diseases that kill many of the 8.1 million children who die each year from poverty-related causes. According to GiveWell, there are several organizations that can save a life for somewhere in the range of US\$600–US\$1200, and on the GiveWell website (www.givewell.org), you

can see which it ranks most highly. Since you can give to one of the top-ranked organizations, it seems clear that the third premise of the argument is true for people who spend at least a few hundred dollars a year on things they do not really need. They can save a life, or prevent some extreme poverty, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance.

There may still be some people who regard global poverty as a kind of black hole, into which we pour money, and never make any progress. But we are making progress. That estimate I just mentioned, that about 8.1 million children under 5 die every year from avoidable, poverty-related causes, comes from UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund. That figure is shocking—it's about 22,000 children dying every day—but fortunately it has been dropping. If you pick up the 2010 paperback edition of my book, *The Life You Can Save*, the figure it gives is 8.8 million. In the 2009 hardcover edition, the figure was almost a million more. In fact, going right back to the 1960s, the figure was as many as 20 million children a year. When you consider that the world's population in the 1960s was only about half of what it is today, we have made encouraging progress. As a percentage of the world's population, the number of children who die before they reach the age of 5 from poverty-related causes is below a quarter of what it was fifty years ago. So this is not an insoluble problem; it's not a black hole that we just pour money into without seeing any results. We do see results, but we are still in a situation where far too many children are dying each day because of this preventable poverty. This is something that we could do something about. We know what to do. We're immunizing more children against measles. We're providing safe drinking water for more villages. We're providing local health clinics with very simple treatments for diarrhoea. We're providing more people with bed nets so their children don't get malaria, another major killer of children.

IS THERE A CONFLICT BETWEEN REDUCING POVERTY AND PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT?

Concern for the poor appears to be in tension with the need to protect our environment. Is there any point in saving lives if the people whose lives are saved will continue to have more children than they can feed, so that in another generation there will be even more hungry people seeking assistance? Don't rising populations in developing countries increase the pressure on forests and other ecosystems, often the last refuge of endangered species of plants and animals? It is undeniable that saving innocent human lives is good, but how do we balance that good against the loss of extinction? Then there is climate change. How would the world cope if everyone were to become affluent and seek a lifestyle that consumes as much energy, per capita, as those who are affluent today?

Part of the answer—the easy part—is that poverty reduction and environmental values often point in the same direction. It is simplistic to assume that helping more children to survive to reproductive age is bound to increase population in poor countries. One important reason why poor people have large families is that they need to be sure that one or two of their children will survive to take care of them in their old age. As parents grow more confident that their children will live to adulthood, they have fewer children. If they no longer need child labor to grow food, that removes another reason for having children. Most important of all, if reducing poverty makes it possible for families to send their children—especially their daughters—to school, all the evidence indicates that their children will have smaller families than they otherwise would. That tendency will be reinforced if women have opportunities to work outside the home. Obviously, access to family planning helps too. So in several different ways, what reduces poverty and promotes development also reduces population growth. If we look at what has happened to population growth in developed countries, this shouldn't come as a surprise.

This has consequences for preserving forests in developing countries. In the long run, aid for schools and local health clinics will often be the most effective way to reduce the population pressures that lead to turning forests into fields. But we shouldn't pretend that there is bound to be this kind of harmony between economic development and environmentalism. Some development projects provide employment opportunities for the poor, but at a high environmental cost. From Indonesia to Brazil, vast areas of tropical rainforest have been cleared to grow palm oil, or soybeans, or to graze cattle. The destruction of forests destroys ecosystems, and releases huge quantities of carbon, thus accelerating climate change.

In tropical Africa, logging roads through jungles offer new opportunities to impoverished villagers, who may get work with the logging companies, or may find it easier to get their local products to markets. Among these local products, however, is "bushmeat"—a general term that covers meat from any wild animal, and includes the flesh of chimpanzees and gorillas. Improved access to hitherto remote jungles and the incentive of cash payment has led to widespread hunting that has slashed the numbers of many of the hunted species.

What should we do? Sometimes we should choose to protect the environment, and the nonhuman animals that depend on it, even if that denies economic opportunities to some people living in extreme poverty. Areas rich in unique biodiversity are part of the world's heritage, and ought to be protected. We should, of course, try to find alternative environmentally sustainable opportunities for those living in or near these areas. If protecting a world heritage benefits all of us, it is unreasonable to expect local residents to bear the full cost—in terms of economic opportunities foregone—of that protection.

We should help today's global poor, but not at the expense of tomorrow's global poor. To preserve the options available to future generations, we

should aim at development that does not do further damage to wilderness or to endangered species—and will eventually, I hope, lead to greater respect for the interests of all other sentient beings, who should also count in their own right. We should also seek development that brings us closer to a demographic transition that in turn stabilizes global population at a sustainable level.

It is clear, though, that the planet cannot sustain 6 billion people at the level of the most affluent billion in the world today, consuming the resources and emitting the greenhouse gases that we are emitting. Climate change is a dire threat to all the progress we have made in reducing global poverty.

The failure of the major industrialized nations to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions to a level that will not cause serious adverse effects to others is moral wrongdoing on a scale that exceeds even the wrongdoing of the great imperial powers during the era of colonialism. Even those who think that we have no obligations to help anyone beyond our borders will, I hope, agree that we have obligations not to harm them—and harming them is exactly what we are doing. According to the World Health Organization, the rise in temperature that occurred between the 1970s and 2004 is causing an additional 140,000 deaths every year (roughly equivalent to causing, every week, as many deaths as occurred in the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001). The major killers are climate-sensitive diseases such as malaria, dengue, and diarrhoea, which is more common when there is a lack of safe water. Malnutrition resulting from crops that fail because of high temperatures or low rainfall is also responsible for many deaths. Fertile, densely settled delta regions in Egypt, Bangladesh, India and Vietnam are at risk from rising sea levels.

In 2007 the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the scientific body established by the United Nations

Environment Program and the World Meteorological Association, found that a temperature rise, by 2080, in the range of 2.0–2.4° C would put stress on water resources used by 1.2 billion people. Rising sea levels would expose, each year, an additional 16 million people to coastal flooding. A temperature rise limited to 2.0° C by 2080 now seems about the best we can hope for, and recently there have been alarming indications that sea level rises could be much greater than the Fourth Assessment Report anticipated. *Perhaps* a technological miracle is just around the corner, one that will enable everyone in the world to consume energy at something like the levels at which we consume it, without bringing about disaster for everyone. It isn't ethically defensible, however, to do nothing while hoping for a miracle, given that it will be others, not us, who suffer the gravest consequences if that miracle never occurs.

Climate change is a dire threat to all the progress we have made in reducing global poverty

There is a strong moral case for saying that rich nations should cut back on their “luxury emissions” before poor nations have to cut back on “subsistence emissions.” India still has more than 450 million people living in extreme poverty, and China over 200 million. No one with any concern for human welfare could ask the world's poor to refrain from increasing their greenhouse gas emissions in order to put more food on the table for their families, when we think little of flying down to the tropics for a winter vacation, emitting more greenhouse gases in a week than the typical family in a developing country does in a year. Needs should always take precedence over luxuries.

So all of us living comfortably in industrialized nations should be prepared to change our lifestyles in order to protect the environment and reduce the chances that climate-related catastrophes will harm ourselves and

others. We should use more energy from sources other than fossil fuels, use less air-conditioning and less heat, fly and drive less, and eat less meat, for meat production is a major source of greenhouse gas emissions. Those are things that we ought to start doing now, for our own sake, for the sake of the global poor, and for the sake of future generations everywhere.

HOW DEMANDING CAN OUR OBLIGATIONS BE?

There is a different kind of objection to my argument for aid that must also be taken seriously. This is that to set so high a standard is likely to be counterproductive. If we argue that people are obliged to give to the point at which by giving more we sacrifice something of comparable moral significance, many will just throw up their hands and say “If that is what morality demands, too bad for morality.”

Is it true that the standard set by our argument is so high as to be counterproductive? There is not much evidence to go by, but discussions of the argument with students and others have led me to think it might be. On the other hand the conventionally accepted standard—a few coins in a collection tin when one is waved under your nose—is obviously far too low. What level should we advocate? In my book *The Life You Can Save*—and on the corresponding website, www.thelifeyoucansave.com—I have suggested a progressive scale, like a tax scale. It begins at just 1% of income, and for 90% of taxpayers, it does not require giving more than 5%. This is therefore an entirely realistic amount, and one that people could easily give with no sacrifice—and indeed, often with a personal gain, since there are many psychological studies showing that those who give are happier than those who do not. I do not really know if the scale I propose is the one that will, if widely advocated, achieve the greatest total amount donated. But I calculated that if everyone in the affluent world

gave according to that scale, it would raise US\$1.5 trillion dollars each year—which is eight times what the United Nations task force headed by the economist Jeffrey Sachs calculated would be needed to meet the Millennium Development Goals, set by the leaders of all the world's nations when they met at the UN Millennium Development Summit in 2000. Those goals included reducing by half the proportion of the world's people living in extreme poverty, and the proportion of people who suffer from hunger, as well as reducing by two-thirds the death toll among children under 5—thus saving more than 5 million lives every year—and enabling children everywhere to have a full course of primary schooling.

If everyone with abundance were to contribute to the effort to reduce extreme poverty and all that goes with it, the amount each of us would need to give would be quite modest

This surprising outcome—that if everyone with abundance were to contribute to the effort to reduce extreme poverty and all that goes with it, the amount each of us would need to give would be quite modest—shows that the argument with which this essay began is demanding only because so few of those with the ability to help the poor are doing anything significant to help them. We do not need to transfer half, or a quarter, or even a tenth, of the wealth of the rich to the poor. If few are helping, those few have to cut very deep before they get to the point at which giving more would involve sacrificing something of comparable moral significance to the life saved by their gift. But if we all, or even most of us, gave according to the scale I have suggested, none of us would have to give up much. That is why this is a suitable standard for public advocacy. What we need to do is change our public ethics so that for anyone who can afford to buy luxuries—and even a bottle of water is a luxury if there is safe drinking water available free—giving something

significant to those in extreme poverty becomes an elementary part of what it is to live an ethical life.

WHY DON'T PEOPLE GIVE MORE?

If the arguments for doing more to reduce extreme poverty are so clear, why aren't we doing that already? There are many reasons for that. Some of these are psychological reasons rather than ethical issues. But a lot of the things that people think of as somehow making a difference, I would say only make a psychological difference, not a real ethical difference. So, for instance, you all agreed that we should help the child in the pond, and probably you all would help the child in the pond if you were to find yourself in that situation. Why don't you all then help people elsewhere in the world? Part of the psychological problem is that they're not here in front of you, and you're not in a one-to-one situation where you can see that you can make a difference. Psychologists have studied a variety of different phenomena that are relevant to when a person will help a stranger. I've come to realize in looking at this literature that, when I came up with that example of the child drowning in the pond, I had unconsciously produced an example that is really well suited to drawing emotional responses, much better suited in fact than the global poverty issue is. So, for example, there is an identifiable victim that you're helping. This makes a huge difference.

Here's an example of the kind of study that shows it does. Psychologists ask students to come in for an experiment and offer them US\$15. When the students come in for this experiment; they're told, "Here's a questionnaire. Please fill it in. Hand it in. We'll pay you your US\$15." So they fill in the questionnaire, which of course has nothing to do with the experiment. They hand in the questionnaire at the end, and they're given US\$15 in cash in small bills, and they're told, "By the way, each month our

department supports a charity. Here's some information about the charity we're supporting this month. I wonder if you'd like to give some of your earnings to the charity." Then, randomly selected, half of the students get a piece of information which has a picture of a 7-year-old African girl, and it says, "This is Rokia; she's 7 years old; she lives in Malawi; she goes to bed hungry at night because her family can't provide enough food for her. You can help her." The other half are given a piece of information that has no photo, and says, "In Malawi, thousands of children go to bed hungry at night. You can help them." Sounds like pretty similar information you're being given, isn't it? Except that in one case there's an identifiable person. But surely nobody thinks, "Oh, yes, the money that I give and that everybody else here this month gives, is all going to Rokia." That would be a bit odd, wouldn't it, for the department just to collect for Rokia this month. That would mean that she would become quite wealthy by Malawian standards. So the students can't really think that. Yet, by quite a significant amount, more people give when they're given the information about Rokia than when they're given the general information.

So the fact that we're talking about anonymous masses of people, millions of people even, makes us less likely to respond. That's one important factor. Another factor is, in the example of the pond there was only you, remember; it was up to you to save the child. It's not up to you to save even Rokia, even if you're given a name, it's not up to you alone. Everybody's being given this information. We know there are other people in the world who could help at least as well as we could. In fact, obviously there are some people who could help much better than we could. What about Bill Gates? Why isn't he helping? Actually he is helping. No doubt there are other very wealthy people who aren't helping that much. So that's another phenomenon that psychologists have studied, the diffusion of responsibility. Again, you can show quite easily, if you stage an accident in which there's a victim who needs help, and there's only one person there who can help the accident victim, that person's very likely to help.

On the other hand, if that person is only one of half a dozen, and the other half dozen are all the experimenter's stooges who have been told not to go and help the accident victim then the person who is the naïve subject, as psychologists call them, the one who doesn't know that this has all been rigged, is much less likely to go and help. In other words, basically, we're sheep. We follow the leader; we don't often stand up and think for ourselves.

We need to try and change these variables. We need to change the cultural standard so that giving becomes more normal. That's one of the things I'm trying to do with the website I mentioned earlier, www.thelifeyoucansave.com. I've invited people to go there and pledge to give a certain percentage of their income to help the global poor. I hope that this will make it easier for others to go on and pledge, because they can see they are not alone in doing this. Some of them also have contributed photos of themselves and a line or two as to why this is significant and why it makes a difference. That's an attempt to change our culture so that instead of thinking that all you have to do to live a good life, an ethical life, is to obey the "thou shalt not" types of commandment—not cheat, steal, lie, attack others, and so on—, we come to see that we have some positive obligations to help those in need where we can relatively easily do so. That would be a really important change in our world today. That would make a really significant difference.

WHERE DO OUR REAL INTERESTS LIE?

We are very much focused on thinking about our interests in terms of how much money we have. But when we stop and think about it, none of us would really say that the most important thing in life is to have a big bank balance. We would probably say, "Well, yes, you know it's nice to have a big bank balance, but that's because then you can do a variety of things and

you'll be happier." But what has become clear is that people who are involved in causes larger than themselves, and who contribute to charity of various kinds, say that they are more satisfied with their lives than people who don't. That finding comes out again and again in the general well-being surveys that have been taken for many years in a large number of different countries.

We're even starting to understand the mechanisms of this because we now have the ability to take real-time images of what happens in people's brains when they do various kinds of things. This has been done (admittedly the study I am about to cite was a small one, and it would be good to have it replicated) with people who have been given some money and asked if they want to make a donation to a charity. Now, whether they say "yes" or "no" to that is not something the experimenter knows; it's done anonymously. So the reaction that I'm about to talk about is not related to the subjects knowing that they are enhancing their public reputation, as some cynics might say. Yet, with those people who do decide to give, we can see a spike in activity in the reward centers of the brain, the same areas of the brain that are active when we're doing things that we enjoy, whether it's a particular kind of food that we find delicious or sexual activity that we're enjoying or whatever else it might be. It seems that they reward us for being generous as well as doing those other pleasant things. Exactly why is an interesting question. No doubt it has something to do with the circumstance in which we evolved in societies where giving was something that enhanced our survival value in a community that required some sort of cooperation. I'm arguing that we should extend that beyond the immediate face-to-face community, to the world as a whole. It seems that the same mechanisms are there.

In terms of the way we live our lives, we are likely to find involvement in these larger causes is actually rewarding and fulfilling, something that enables us to feel that our lives are more meaningful than they are if we

are simply living for ourselves and thinking only about our own narrower self interest. So while giving to help the global poor may involve some financial sacrifice, we should not think of it as involving any sacrifice of our real interests, properly understood. On this issue of global poverty, therefore, ethics and self-interest are not as much at odds as one might at first imagine. There is, on the contrary, a considerable degree of harmony between them.

>> All citizens of wealthy, industrialized nations have an obligation to reduce extreme poverty. So why don't we give more? We're afraid aid doesn't work. We're afraid of the environmental damage brought by increased wealth. We don't want to renounce our own comfort. But none of these reasons is valid. Aid does work and we have the data to prove it. Furthermore, poverty reduction and environmental protection often coincide, and even when they don't, there is still a strong moral case for saying that rich nations should cut back on their "luxury emissions" before poor nations have to reduce their subsistence emissions. Ultimately, it is in our own interest to end extreme poverty, a goal that could be achieved if each one of us were to give up just a fraction of what we own.

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