

1 Introduction: Assistance-based and Contribution-based Responsibilities to Address Global Poverty

The extent and severity of global poverty are among the most profoundly disturbing aspects of our world. Statistics provide some sense of the scale of the problem. But they are relatively sterile, not least from being so often repeated, and fail to capture important features of the lived experience of those in severe poverty. We – relatively affluent people in the developed world – are accustomed to being able to change our circumstances for the better through hard work. We are able to guard against misfortune fairly easily most of the time. Those in severe poverty cannot do so and live in a precarious state. What would it be like for an unexpected illness or weather event to push us from just barely meeting our needs to not meeting them at all? What would it be like for our children or others close to us to die or experience debilitating illness from what (in our current state of affluence) causes only relatively short-term inconvenience? When we think about poverty, to the extent that we can, in terms of its implications for day-to-day experience, its prevalence and persistence seems all the more terrible. But it is one thing to recognize a terrible problem and quite another to establish who, if anyone, is responsible for doing something about it and what they might sensibly do.

This book is a philosophical exploration of the nature of the moral responsibilities of relatively affluent individuals in the developed world to address global poverty and the arguments that philosophers have offered for our having these responsibilities. The first type of argument grounds such responsibilities in the ability to avert serious suffering by taking on some cost. We will call responsibilities based on mere ability to help

Some of the chapters in this book draw on the previously published articles ‘How Much for the Child’, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 16, no. 1 (2013), 189–204; ‘The Implications of Failing to Assist’, *Social Theory and Practice*, 40, no. 4 (2014), 570–90; ‘The Feasible Alternatives Thesis: Kicking Away the Livelihoods of the Global Poor’, *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*, 11, no. 1 (2012), 97–119; ‘Are Trade Subsidies and Tariffs Killing the Global Poor?’, *Social Research*, 79, no. 4 (2012), 865–96; and ‘602 and One Dead: On Contribution to Global Poverty and Liability to Defensive Force’, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 21, no. 2 (2011), 279–99.

We are grateful to be able to use this material here.

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assistance-based. The second type of argument seeks to ground such responsibilities in the fact that the affluent are contributing to such poverty. Because the affluent are contributing to poverty, they have a responsibility to take on cost to address it. We will call responsibilities based on contribution to harm *contribution-based*. Parts I and II are respectively concerned with these two responsibilities.

We will criticize many of the claims advanced by those who seek to ground stringent responsibilities to the poor by invoking these two types of arguments. Perhaps the most well-known proponents of each type of argument are Peter Singer – who has relied on appeal to assistance-based responsibilities – and Thomas Pogge – who has relied on appeal to contribution-based responsibilities.¹ We will show that Singer’s arguments that individuals are ordinarily required to make very large sacrifices to help others in need are unpersuasive. We will also show that Pogge’s arguments employ an over-broad notion of what it means to contribute to harm, and elide a morally important distinction between doing harm to the poor and enabling harm.

These arguments may be unsuccessful, but it does not follow from this that the affluent are meeting their responsibilities to the poor. We will argue that, while people are not ordinarily required (as Singer argues) to make large sacrifices to assist others in severe need, they are required to take on *moderate* costs to do so. And if the affluent fail consistently to meet this standard, this fact can substantially increase the costs they are required to bear to address it. Further, while we reject Pogge’s argument that the contributions of the affluent to poverty can typically be likened to the contributions of a negligent motorist to the injuries of a person he hits with his car, the affluent may indeed enable poverty abroad through policies and institutions for which they can be held responsible. While enabling harm is not morally equivalent to doing harm, it is not equivalent to allowing harm either; responsibilities based on enabling are typically more stringent than those based on allowing harm.

We shall also explore another question that has received relatively limited attention from those working on this topic: what are the poor permitted to do if the affluent fail in their responsibilities to them?

¹ Singer’s main works on assistance-based responsibilities include P. Singer, ‘Famine, Affluence and Morality’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1, no. 3 (1972), 229–43; *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2009); and *One World: The Ethics of Globalisation* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2004). Pogge’s main works on contribution-based responsibilities include T. Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008); *Politics as Usual: What Lies behind the Pro-Poor Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010); and ‘Severe Poverty as a Violation of Negative Duties’, *Ethics and International Affairs*, 19, no. 1 (2005), 55–83.

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The poor are agents, and not merely patients; how far can they go in acting on their own behalf? We shall argue that if the affluent fail to discharge their responsibilities to the poor – whether assistance-based or contribution-based – they can make themselves liable to harm, whether from the poor or others acting on their behalf, when this is proportionate and necessary to address the needs of the poor.

There are other bases that can be invoked to ground responsibilities to address poverty abroad. One is the presence of associative ties between the poor and the affluent. When families, friends, compatriots and others with whom we share valued associative or affective ties become very poor, or when those with whom we have such ties have unjustly caused poverty that is suffered by others, we ought to take action to remedy or mitigate the poverty – these may be classified as *association-based* responsibilities. Such associative ties may involve having stood in a colonial relation of some sort with some country, sharing its culture or language, or having been the origin of many migrants.² Engaging in sustained economic cooperation might itself be viewed as establishing associative ties that trigger such responsibilities, particularly if such trade makes one country particularly vulnerable to the conduct of the other.³ Another basis is that of having been the beneficiary of conduct that contributed to the incidence of global poverty – *benefiting-based* responsibilities.⁴

These other potential bases of responsibility are important. Indeed, each of us has written on these topics, and clarity about their meaning, significance and application is critical for gaining moral orientation on the issue of global poverty.⁵ Benefiting-based responsibilities, in particular, are likely to significantly increase the amount of cost that the affluent are required to take on to address poverty. However, we do not discuss these arguments here, because attempting to provide a plausible account of assistance- and contribution-based responsibilities is itself a task beyond what we have been

² L. Ypi, R. E. Goodin and C. Barry, 'Associative Duties, Global Justice, and the Colonies', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 37, no. 2 (2009), 103–35.

³ C. Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); R. E. Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable: A Reanalysis of Our Social Responsibilities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

⁴ D. Butt, *Rectifying International Injustice: Principles of Compensation and Restitution between Nations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); H. Lawford-Smith, 'Benefiting from Failures to Address Climate Change', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 31, no. 4 (2014), 392–404; R. E. Goodin, 'Disgorging the Fruits of Historical Wrongdoing', *American Political Science Review*, 107, no. 3 (2013), 478–91.

⁵ B. Haydar and G. Øverland, 'The Normative Implications of Benefiting from Injustice', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 31, no. 4 (2014), 349–62; C. Barry and D. Wiens, 'Benefiting from Wrongdoing and Sustaining Wrongful Harm', *Journal of Moral Philosophy* (2014), 1–23.

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able to cover in a single book. There are various questions regarding even these bases of responsibility that we have not been able to explore here.

The arguments that we focus on here have so far dominated the evolving debate concerning responsibilities of the affluent, yet they remain controversial and poorly understood. They therefore seem the right place to start, even if engaging with them leaves us with an incomplete account of the nature of our responsibilities.

This book is a unified whole, but each of its chapters can be read and understood independently of the others. We summarize below the remaining chapters of this book, which are organized around three main themes.

Part I: Assistance-based Responsibilities

In Chapter 2 we engage with arguments advanced by Peter Singer to the effect that assistance-based responsibilities to help those in severe need are very stringent. We argue that the intuitive case he and others influenced by his work make for this claim is unconvincing. Assistance-based responsibilities require that agents take on only moderate cost to help those in severe need, even when those in need are in front of them and no one else is in a position to help them. In Chapter 3, we discuss the implications of failing in one's assistance-based responsibilities to those in severe need. In particular, we challenge the supposition that, because assistance-based responsibilities are not initially very stringent, failure to discharge them is not particularly important, morally speaking. We argue that when agents fail in their responsibilities to assist, their responsibilities become much more stringent, and they can become liable to infliction of harm.

Chapters 2–3 explore assistance-based responsibilities within relatively simple, small-scale cases. In Chapter 4 we relate the discussions to the much more complex case of global poverty. In particular, we discuss the implications of the fact that the means by which to best assist the poor are controversial, and that some means by which we might seek to help the poor could end up harming them.

Part II: Contribution-based Responsibilities

To understand the significance of contribution-based responsibilities, we need a clear account of the distinction between contributing to and failing to prevent some outcome. In Chapter 5 we take up this task. We do so through engagement with the literature on the so-called doing/allowing distinction. We argue that it is more fruitful to distinguish between doing, allowing and enabling harm, and provide empirical evidence that this

tripartite distinction is also intuitive to non-philosophers. We note that the category of enabling will become central to our analysis of contribution-based responsibilities to address poverty in later chapters of the book.

In Chapter 6 we discuss the normative significance of the distinctions between doing, enabling and allowing harm by relating them to the notion of giving rise to cost. We argue that those who give rise to cost, for example by enabling and doing harm, have more stringent responsibilities to address harm than those who do not give rise to cost. We then discuss some of the other factors relevant to determining how much more stringent they become. We also discuss arguments inspired by Philippa Foot's influential work to the effect that enabling harm is morally equivalent to allowing harm.⁶ We argue that these arguments are unconvincing, and that enabling harm is normatively distinct from allowing. In particular, responsibilities based on enabling harm are more stringent than those based on allowing. In Chapter 7 we discuss the arguments by Thomas Pogge that the affluent are harming the poor abroad. We argue that his central thesis – which we call the 'feasible alternatives thesis' – is unconvincing. His arguments trade on an overly broad notion of contribution to harm; the relations between the affluent and the poor are more fruitfully understood in terms of exploitation. We then discuss the relevance of responsibilities based on having engaged in exploitation, comparing them with assistance-based responsibilities. We argue that reasons based on exploiting are no more stringent than reasons based on capacity to assist. But, like responsibilities to assist, failure to act on responsibilities not to exploit can ultimately result in very stringent responsibilities. In Chapter 8 we discuss contribution-based responsibilities in the context of global trade, evaluating claims in popular media and by some philosophers that subsidies and tariffs are means by which the affluent are killing poor people abroad. We then discuss much more disturbing ways in which the affluent appear to enable harm through global trade: by providing the means to local governments and private actors to do harm.

Part III: Implications of Contribution

In Chapter 9 we discuss the implications of failure to abide by contribution-based responsibilities to the poor. We defend the view that *if* the affluent indeed have stringent responsibilities to address poverty,

⁶ S. C. Rickless, 'The Moral Status of Enabling Harm', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 92, no. 1 (2011), 66–86; M. Hanser, 'Killing, Letting Die and Preventing People from Being Saved', *Utilitas*, 11, no. 3 (1999), 277–95.

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then these responsibilities can be enforced by the poor (or third parties acting on their behalf) through the proportionate use of force. We evaluate various arguments that ordinary affluent people should be immune to force or otherwise excused from their stringent contribution-based responsibilities – because they are (allegedly) innocent, only make smaller/insignificant contributions or are ‘one among many’.

In Chapter 10 we discuss the relevance of the fact that when considering whether or not an agent has contribution-based responsibilities to address harm, there is often a significant amount of uncertainty about whether and to what extent they have indeed contributed to the harm in question. In Chapter 11 we discuss the relevance of the fact that individual contributors to global problems do not typically ‘make a difference’ to the occurrence of any harms. We argue that the stringency of the responsibilities of those who know that they are not difference-makers with respect to the occurrence of some harm is reduced, but is still significantly greater than for those who are in no way involved in producing that harm.

Our book is concerned with a pressing practical problem, but we do not tie our normative conclusions about these issues directly to proposals for institutional reform or policy change. The temptation to do so is very strong. It’s hard to engage with the moral tragedy of global poverty without reaching for solutions that give individual agents clear guidance – to give money to a particular organization or for a particular cause, to support some particular reform of global trade. But one of the themes of this book is that the complexity of the problem of global poverty undermines the credibility of simple solutions that have been proposed in the literature. This is not to say that there are not practical means of addressing global poverty. But defining and justifying such interventions would require a level of engagement with the details of particular policy questions that we cannot take up here.

Terminology

This is a book about the nature of some of our moral responsibilities. We shall refer to features possessed by different types of responsibilities as the *normative characteristics* of responsibilities. Our aim is to explore the normative characteristics of assistance-based and contribution-based responsibilities to address poverty abroad. The normative characteristic we are most concerned to explore is *stringency*. A person’s responsibility to ϕ is stringent, in our sense, to the extent that it (1) constrains her and (2) can demand much of her. The responsibility to ϕ constrains her to the

extent that she cannot justify refusing to ϕ by appealing to the costs to herself of ϕ -ing or to other valuable ends that her conduct could instead bring about if she does not ϕ .⁷ Responsibilities to refrain from breaking the limbs of innocent non-threatening people are ordinarily thought to be very constraining, whereas those to refrain from being impolite are not. I cannot break the limbs of innocent non-threatening people just because refraining from so doing would impose a significant cost on me. I may, on the other hand, be impolite to someone when refraining from doing so would impose a significant cost on me.

A responsibility to ϕ is demanding to the extent that a person who has failed to ϕ is required to take on cost to remedy the situation of the person to whom the responsibility was owed. Responsibilities to refrain from breaking the limbs of innocents are ordinarily thought to be quite demanding, whereas moral reasons not to be impolite to them are not. If I have broken the limb of an innocent, I am ordinarily required to take on a great deal of cost, should this be necessary, to address this harm or to compensate him,⁸ whereas I am not required to take on comparable cost to compensate those to whom I have been impolite – an apology would ordinarily suffice.

Responsibilities may also be thought to vary in their *specificity* and *enforceability*. A person who does severe harm to an innocent, for example, is ordinarily thought to be required to take on more cost to compensate *that* innocent than they would be required to bear to address the needs of other similarly situated innocents to whom they had done no harm. It is more controversial whether this is true with respect to harms that people fail to prevent.⁹ And it is ordinarily thought to be permissible to prevent people from doing severe harm to innocents through the proportional use of force, while the permissibility of using force against those who fail to prevent harm is contested.¹⁰ All claims regarding the normative characteristics of different responsibilities are, of course, open to dispute; we have used these examples only to give an intuitive sense of their meaning, not to establish any conclusions about the nature of the responsibilities in question. For example, we shall argue that assistance-based responsibilities are also enforceable and may be specific, but we recognize that this is a more controversial position than accepting that contribution-based responsibilities possess these characteristics.

⁷ On the idea of the appeal to cost, see S. Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); and B. Haydar, 'Special Responsibility and the Appeal to Cost', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 17, no. 2 (2009), 129–45.

⁸ Ordinarily, since there may be conditions under which no such responsibilities arise: for example, when my breaking the limb of an innocent is the only way to prevent their death.

⁹ We'll argue in Chapter 2 that assistance-based responsibilities can be specific in this way.

¹⁰ We'll argue in Chapter 3 that assistance-based responsibilities are enforceable.

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Finally, we will refer to the cost that a person has a responsibility to shoulder for a particular purpose (P) as the *required cost*. We will call whatever cost a person would in fact need to shoulder in order to realize (P) the *necessary cost*. And we will refer to the cost that the person actually shoulders to realize (P) as the *actual cost*. Sometimes the necessary cost will exceed the required cost, and in that case the agent will no longer have a responsibility to realize (P). Should he nevertheless make the greater sacrifice and realize (P), he will have done more than was required of him as a matter of responsibilities. It is only when the necessary cost of realizing (P) is equal to or less than the required cost of realizing (P) that the agent will have a responsibility to do so. It should be clear how required cost is related to the other notions explained above – the greater the required cost an agent is responsible for shouldering to realize (P), the more stringent is their responsibility to realize (P). Note that there can be a difference between the required cost and the cost that a person is required to actually take on in order to realize (P). It may turn out, for example, that the required cost of addressing some hardship is high, but that the actual cost that should be taken on to address it is much lower, as efforts to address it are likely to be unsuccessful or counterproductive.