DEBATE: GLOBAL POVERTY RELIEF

More Than Charity: Cosmopolitan Alternatives to the "Singer Solution"

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THE POLITICS OF GLOBAL POVERTY

Nothing is more politically important to think about, and act upon, than global poverty relief. Numbers can mask the human faces of poverty, but they do bring out its scale: Today, any day, 30,000 children under the age of five will die from preventable illness and starvation. A further 163 million children who will survive this day are severely undernourished. Some 1.2 billion people will try to subsist on less than one dollar a day, while 2.4 billion will not have access to basic sanitation.[1]

It's reasonable to feel some despair. What can any one of us, the relatively rich, even begin to do to reduce this immense daily misery? How much would we have to sacrifice? Since the costs to ourselves may be significant, how much *ought* we to sacrifice? And as the terminology of a richer "we" and poorer "they" hides vast differences within groups, it helps to ask the more concrete and controlled question: Which of us must do what for whom?

In practice, the traditional "statist" answer to this last question has been brute and inadequate: "The state must look after some basic needs of its own citizens." International institutions are highly visible these days, but that should not deceive us into thinking things have changed all that much. Including support for bodies like the United Nations, the United States spends only .13 percent of its yearly resources on assisting poor and marginalized people in other countries. It is not alone. Almost every developed state lavishes over 99 percent of its resources (GNP) solely on "looking out for its own."[2] Since this parochialism of states is the dominant order of the day, we should hardly be surprised that few inroads have been made into relieving global poverty.

How can a better alternative world be achieved—politically, economically, militarily, socially? Some massive failures of development strategies in recent decades offer hard lessons about our limited grip on these vexing questions, and the difficulty of formulating feasible answers. Because these questions are vast and interlinked, and because the answers are matters of vision as well as prudence, the need for a systematic orientation of our practical thinking and action has never been greater.

This article evaluates one important attempt to provide such an orientation—

[1] These figures are from the United Nations Human Development Report 2001 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 9-13.

[2] World Bank, World Development Indicator 2000, table 6.8 (provides definitions and measures of the limited extent of development assistance), available at www.worldbank.org/data/wdi2000/pdfs/tab6_8.pdf.

that of the moral philosopher most widely known outside academia, Peter Singer. Singer's commitment to social activism is admirable and—rare amongst philosophers—he is a pleasure to read. But I argue that his overall approach to poverty relief—he labels it "The Singer Solution to World Poverty"—is irremediably lacking as a theoretical orientation for action. I show how Singer's approach neglects the ways in which the scale of societies and their complex interdependence in today's world significantly reshape what is practically feasible and morally required of us. After criticizing the "Singer solution," I argue that a different theoretical orientation for development and politics is needed—a "political philosophy," not a dangerously individualist "practical ethics." I show that this theoretical orientation enables us to identify a very different range of actions and actors necessary to reduce mass poverty.

Both Singer's approach and the alternative approach that I develop here fall within a school of moral thought that can be labeled "cosmopolitan." Cosmopolitans broadly agree that the interests of all persons (Singer would say animals) must count equally in moral deliberation, and that geographical location and citizenship make no intrinsic difference to the rights and obligations of those individuals. In one sense, then, what follows is a debate between friends. But in another sense, the divide is more serious: Singer yokes cosmopolitanism (individual-centric morality as the basis of justice) to individualist social explanation and moral directives. Both of the latter are implausible routes to understanding the justice or injustice of structures of governance and society, and the rightness or wrongness of the actions of individuals operating within those structures. Worse, both routes, taken as bases for action, are likely to be perilous to the poor, hurting those whom cosmopolitans generally wish to help. I attempt to rescue cosmopolitanism as a plausible and practical guide to social action by linking it to better forms of explanation and recommendation that are likely actually to help the poor. Hume may have been right, on the whole, that "truth springs from argument among friends";[3] but, with so much at stake, I must rather try to rescue others from the charmingly simple persuasions of my friend.

THE SINGER SOLUTION TO WORLD POVERTY

Singer is famous for his extremely demanding view about what we, the relatively rich, *ought* to do and sacrifice to help the poor. His article "Famine, Affluence and Morality," written in 1972, stated this view with the help of a resonant analogy: Singer asked readers to imagine that, on the way to giving a lecture, he walks past a shallow pond, and witnesses a child in danger of drowning.[4] He can easily wade in and rescue the child, but he may dirty or even ruin his clothes, and fail to make the lecture. Singer rightly points out that it would be morally monstrous to allow these minor considerations to count against taking action to save the child's life. Then he generalizes from this ethical case to the situation of relatively wealthy people, especially in developed countries, vis-à-vis people starving or dying of preventable diseases in developing countries. We do nothing or almost nothing, while thousands die. Yet it is seriously wrong to fail to give aid when the costs to oneself are not of

[3] Cited in Dennis Leyden, *Thinking Critically in Economics*, Web edition, at www.uncg.edu/eco/dpleyden/ctworkbook/hbook_1discussions(2e).htm.

[4] Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence and Morality" (1972), reprinted in his *Writings on an Ethical Life* (New York: Ecco Press, 2000), pp. 105-17.

"moral significance" or even of "comparable moral importance."

When we think about it, Singer points out, very few things are as morally important as saving life. On his account, this is demonstrated both by eliciting our intuitions (with thought experiments) and by utilitarian reasoning (moral action involves minimizing suffering and maximizing well-being). Either mode of reasoning makes most of our material acquisitions (say, another jacket) and new experiences (say, enjoying an opera or a concert) seem like luxuries of little or no moral significance. In a more recent article Singer concludes: "The formula is simple: whatever money you're spending on luxuries, not necessities, should be given away."[5] Who should give how much exactly? The average American household should give away any annual income over $30,000.[6] Singer acknowledges that widespread and deep altruism from such relatively rich people is profoundly unlikely. But he still insists that "we should at least know that we are failing to live a morally decent life"—above all because this knowledge is likely to motivate us to donate more than we do at present.[7] Singer is even willing to be sparing in his blame: given the present "standard . . . of normal behavior" of American citizens, he "wouldn't go out of [his] way to chastise" those who donate only 10 percent of their income.[8]

So we know *who* ought to do *what*; but for *whom*? Whom should the rich select as recipients of this (obligatory) charity? Only two considerations count for Singer: the relative extent of poor people's need, and "the degree of certainty that . . . our assistance will get to the right person, and will really help that person."[9] Singer is clearly a cosmopolitan, emphatically rejecting shared membership in a nation or a state as grounds for choosing to give to one person rather than another. He insists that "in important respects, the tie of nationality is more like the tie of race than it is like the tie of family or friend."[10] His reasoning, in short, is that "human life would not be as good" without intimate ties, and any attempt to eradicate them would require abhorrent levels of coercion. National or patriotic ties, on the other hand, neither are necessary to the well-being of all of us nor are they intransigent. Thus these ties cannot be justified from "an impartial perspective."[11] Citizens and governments that accord priority to compatriots, while people in foreign lands are in far more urgent and desperate need, are committing a sin that comes close to discriminating on the basis of race.

We now have before us Singer's answer to our question, who must do what for whom? Three main points about his argument are vital:

1. It relies on (a) analogies between individual cases—actually, thought experiments—and more complex real-world situations and/or (b) utilitarian positions about maximizing happiness and minimizing pain. These analogies and positions aim to reveal that there is no moral equivalence between our penchant for luxuries and the survival needs of poor people.

2. It denies that (a) shared citizenship and (b) distance per se make any difference to the nature and extent of our obligations to help others: "It makes no moral difference whether the person I help is a neighbor's child ten yards

[5] Peter Singer, "The Singer Solution to World Poverty" (1999), reprinted in *Writings on an Ethical Life*, pp. 118-24, at p. 123.
[6] Ibid. The amount is in 1999 dollars.
[7] Ibid., p. 124.
[8] Ibid., p. 122.
[9] Peter Singer, "Outsiders: Our Obligations to Those Beyond Our Borders," (forthcoming [author's draft]), pp. 1-14, at p. 3.
[10] Ibid., p. 7.
[11] Ibid.; see also "The Good Life," in *How Are We to Live?* (1993), reprinted in *Writings on an Ethical Life*, pp. 264-72, at p. 267.

from me or a Bengali whose name I shall never know, ten thousand miles away."[12]

3. It results in a simple measure of sacrifice and a definite injunction to act: Donate a large portion of your income—(a) at least 10 percent, or (b) to really avoid wrongdoing, every cent not devoted to purchasing necessities. Singer even passes along the toll-free numbers of UNICEF (1-800-378-5437) and Oxfam (1-800-793-2687) so that "you, too, have the information you need to save a child's life."[13]

This is an emotive and appealing argument. But if Singer's exhortations make you want to act immediately in the ways he recommends, you *should not* do so. First, be wary, for he tells us something we so want to hear: that there is a simple way to appease our consciences, that there is a royal road to poverty relief. Sadly, as much as we wish it, this is not the case. By exploring a complex of mistakes in Singer's arguments, and by elucidating recent hard lessons from the theory and practice of development and politics, I now show that his approach is likely to seriously harm the poor. We must be careful not to make ourselves feel better in ways that damage the capabilities and well-being of the vulnerable. I show that a very different kind of approach to relieving mass poverty is called for. It is more analytically demanding (it resists any comforting illusion of a royal road), but it would in fact help the poor. Although Singer rightly endorses a morality that shows global concern, and rightly criticizes the parochialism of states, there are more coherent theoretical foundations for the effective practice of cosmopolitan development.

WHY CHARITY IS NEVER ENOUGH

Arguments from analogy may be rhetorically effective, but do not stand up even as initial forms of philosophical reasoning about how we ought to act at a distance and over time. They are acontextual. I will mention the kind of *moral* acontextualism that preoccupies Singer's leading critics, but only as a prelude to arguing that both Singer and his critics suffer from a more serious kind of *political* acontextualism.

Singer's critics also like using thought experiments: What if, every day, as Singer walks past the pond, fifty children were close to drowning? Every day, he takes his self-imposed obligation seriously, and spends the day rescuing them, abandoning his lectures. Princeton gets wind of this and does not share his ethical orientation. Now, it is one thing to expect someone to save a drowning child and give up one lecture, but it is quite another—if there are tens or thousands drowning (or starving, or ill) every day—to expect him to devote himself to being a lifeguard instead of a teacher. And since there is always so much misery and danger in the world, it seems that moral people will have to give up almost any job that doesn't directly or maximally involve saving lives. Yet there are many values other than survival: Can it really be morally required to give up vital sources of meaning such as the work we do, the social commitments we have, and the knowledge and excellences we pursue? Some of these life projects are so central to our existence that it is a sheer "overload of obligation" to expect people to give them up. As Bernard Williams famously argued, people should not be regarded as levers for utility or survival maximization:[14] We ought also to care about

[12] Singer, "Outsiders," p. 3.
[13] Singer, "The Singer Solution to World Poverty," p. 120.
[14] Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality," in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 1-19.

love, work, wisdom, art, truth, and much more that is relevant to our dignity and significance as beings. In short, Singer demands that we deal with poverty by impoverishing our human lives.

I don't intend to discuss these kinds of criticism much further. It is quite evident that we cannot achieve a plausible weighting of values if we use reasoning that removes from view, or underrepresents, all values other than survival. In his more recent writings—partly in light of this criticism—Singer wisely tempers his claims. He allows that we can justify spending more on our families and the necessities of their existence; all he asks is that we give away everything beyond that, or donate at least 10 percent of our income. So all we have to do is give up expensive shopping, eating, and traveling. Is this too much to ask?

Unlike Singer and his panoply of Williams-type critics, I just don't think this is the central question. We need to see our way through the debate between them, because it is couched in terms of an unhelpful binary opposition of "self-ish" against "self-less." The whole debate is too narcissistic in its preoccupation with conscience and sacrifice. As a consequence, the recommendations from both sides are the opposite of helpful.

Let's take as a pressing case the HIV/AIDS pandemic ravaging my own country of origin, South Africa, and the desire to help prevent ever-increasing infection. This example is less artificial than those Singer favors. Does his conception of the nature and extent of sacrifice make a difference or provide a plausible route to alleviating this misery?

I could take most of my money and give it to an AIDS organization. But the effect of my contribution would be dwarfed and perhaps overridden by President Mbeki's bizarre and injudicious remarks that HIV does not cause AIDS. So perhaps then I want to contribute to political accountability and economic reforms. But here I find that South Africa is locked into a complex global economic and political order dominated by strongly neoliberal presumptions. The problem is not simply that structural adjustment and Mbeki may eradicate any positive effect of my donation (doing no good). The problem is not even simply that—as in Zimbabwe—I may increase the power and hold of a kleptocratic elite (doing harm). Rather, given the structure of the world as it is, the most serious problem for Singer is that we may do better for South Africans by buying furniture and clothes from ethical manufacturers and manufacturers in developing countries than by donation. Adequate employment opportunities, for instance, are the leading determinant of people's ability to provide for themselves and their families.[15] After all, more than 50 percent of the world's manufacturing jobs are now located outside the OECD region—a twelvefold increase in four decades.[16] As for tourism, a labor-intensive industry, it generated $476 billion worldwide last year, but sub-Saharan Africa received only 2.5 percent of the total number of visitors.[17] Think what a tremendous difference it might make to poor people in the region if that number could be brought closer to 10 or 15 percent.

These kinds of considerations should make us extremely wary of Singer's perfunctory and categorical claims—that we should give up indulgences such as expensive

[15] Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1999), pp. 111-45 and 160-88; for case studies, see Amartya Sen, Jean Drèze, and Athar Hussain, eds., *Hunger and Public Action* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

[16] John Keane, "Who's in Charge Here? The Need for a Rule of Law to Regulate the Emerging Global Civil Society," *Times Literary Supplement*, May 18, 2001.

[17] Audrey D'Angelo, "SA Loses Out While Global Tourism Expands," *The Saturday Star*, May 26, 2001.

clothes, restaurants, beach resorts, and house redecoration.[18] Indeed, in the South African case, manufacturing exports, tourism, and other service industries are among the few successful mechanisms that have kept people from falling further into grinding poverty. If many citizens of developed countries gave up their luxuries, three central planks of the country's development strategy would collapse. (For all that Mbeki is wrong to question the link between HIV and AIDS, he is not mistaken in pointing out that poverty renders people systematically more vulnerable to most diseases.) Among other disastrous consequences would be the crippling of governmental and NGO ability to curb the rate of HIV/AIDS infection and help those suffering from the disease.

So, when Singer says that luxuries are "unnecessary," he is right that rich individuals can survive without them, but wrong to think that poor people can—that is, that their well-being is independent of the market in luxury goods. None of this means that industries and market practices cannot and should not be constrained and reoriented so that they are less rapacious and much more socially beneficial. On the contrary, it tells us that this kind of constraint and reorientation is a priority. But, to bring positive change about, we have to consider more carefully the direct and indirect, cumulative and complex effects of multiple human interactions.

This real case, then, reveals that we need to adopt a very different way of thinking. Where we do not share our everyday lives with people, we interact with them through a complex and differentiated web of political and economic relations. This has great relevance to the plausibility of Singer's argument. *Distance matters because scale matters*—in several ways. The scale of contemporary societies makes more people more vulnerable in more ways to my action and inaction, and to the interactions of multiple other individuals and collectives. That is, my impact at a distance brings more people within the ambit of my moral concern—at the very least, by making me aware of their existence, their capacities, and their need. So scale changes *whom* I ought to prioritize when addressing mass poverty: not so much the poor rather than my family, as large numbers of people enmeshed in social systems rather than isolated individuals. We cooperate and succeed (or fail) not merely through direct interaction but through social rules and institutions. Effective poverty relief will thus require above all extensive cooperation with other agents—indeed, it will require the creation or reform of agencies to reduce poverty. Thus we also need to reconsider *how* to alleviate the plight of the needy, with a particular eye on *who* (which agencies) it is that can best help.

Here's the rub: It is not enough to say that all persons have equal moral claims on us; we need to ask how best to organize ourselves politically and economically to meet those claims. Which combinations of rules and institutions of governance are most effective? What roles ought we to play as individuals in respect of the primary agents of aid and justice? Analogies to ethical decisions by an individual in a hermetically sealed case actually obscure all these problems and questions. For while it is true that we often act as individuals, the causal relevance or impact of our actions depends on the positions we occupy within complex social systems.

Philosophers may want me to put the point a little more technically: Singer conflates issues of practical reason—our obligations to the vulnerable—with issues of

[18] Singer, "The Singer Solution to World Poverty," p. 123.

judgment—the obligations of the relatively rich to the poor in the particular case of the world in which we live. If we are to make judgments of how to act in this world, we should not confuse abstract with practical requirements. From the fact that we have an abstract obligation of aid or charity, it does not follow that we are practically obliged to donate to the poor. How we address poverty is a matter of judgment: understanding the relevant features of a social system or situation; considering which principles are relevant, whether they present competing demands in practice, and how other agents are likely to act; and finally, adjudicating on a contextual course of action. Nothing in the principle of aid or charity determines that the right action in any or all contexts is donation. All-too-quick recommendations are not just a leap from principle to action, they are symptomatic of an implicitly apolitical outlook that does not take the real demands of contextual judgment seriously.

Singer might say that analogies are merely designed to show that we do have an extensive obligation of charity. But this is no answer. His analogies and other arguments abstract from the causal dynamics of poverty and opportunity, and from the mediated and indirect nature of social relations at a global scale. This leads to a serious underestimation of the complexities of the remedies and the diversity of roles available to us. Indeed, it leads to a failure to see that, in making judgments about poverty relief, knowledge of institutions and awareness of roles must frame thinking about individuals. Even aggressively laissez-faire capitalists maintain that their actions are best for the poor. That is, what is at stake most of the time is not how much we should sacrifice, but whether and which uses of resources and what kinds of agencies make a positive difference, and how.

POLITICAL JUDGMENT IN CONTEXT

Lest I seem to sound like a neoliberal apologist, or a defeatist, it is helpful to see how much more informative is the theoretical orientation of Karl Marx. Marx understood that the first step in approaching political struggle and producing change is a structural analysis of the dynamic causes of impoverishment and immiseration. A theory that does not include a contextual and institutional analysis (in the broadest sense) is condemned to recommending brief symptomatic relief, or even damaging and counterproductive action. This is not a peculiarly Marxist point, and one does not have to sympathize with Marxists to think that telling the bourgeoisie to be more charitable as individual actors is unlikely to produce deep changes.

There is, ironically, a quasi-Calvinist strand to the individualist approach to development: an insistence that one can never do enough, never be as moral as one ought to be; and an emphasis on individual conscience rather than effective collective moral norms and political institutions. Yet the well-documented failure of relief efforts in recent decades is a powerful indicator that a structure-sensitive approach to development is indispensable to any wise, humane program or philosophy of right action. Consider, most starkly, the perpetuation and intensification of the Rwandan conflict and the human misery aggravated by aid agencies that sustained refugee camps. In spite of the camps becoming bases for militiamen and incubators for cholera, the prospect of international NGO aid encouraged people not to return to their homes even when it was safer to do so, thus intensifying and prolonging the conflict. Consider also the "food relief" of the 1970s that so damaged the sit-

uation of developing world farmers and their dependents. It is hardly an unfamiliar thought that things can always get worse: consider Shakespeare's King Lear on the Heath, or Titus Andronicus. Development experts will be highly aware of countless recent examples that we can only wish were fictional.

Marx understood all too well the possibility of this kind of inversion of the invisible hand: the well-intentioned agent focusing on his or her lone action may well do more harm than good. In retrospect, Singer would acknowledge that his 1972 claim that "expert observers and supervisors . . . can direct our aid to a refugee in Bengal as we could get it to someone in our own block"[19] is grievously optimistic. Yet Singer remains fond of saying, in one way or another, "We must do something." Given the complex interdependence and economic and political perversities that characterize our shared world, the injunction "first do no harm" deserves at least equal consideration. Or, since we may sometimes have to do some harm to do significant good—courses of action are rarely cost-free—perhaps the most relevant injunction of all is "proceed carefully."

Of course, well-intentioned institutional reform can also do horrible things; moreover, donations can be used to reform the existing institutional order. But there is an important asymmetry here. International and other NGOs can never be the primary agents of justice and aid over the long run.[20] I shall merely list some of the major reasons: their funding is too capricious; their position is too dependent on the will or whim of others (often rulers) whose interests necessarily diverge from those of NGOs; NGOs are far from democratically elected or accountable; and they cannot produce large-scale growth and redistribution. We need NGOs, but we need good government and better markets even more. This is a direct result of our interest in sustainability: the primary agents of justice and aid must, especially in the long run, possess the ultimate power to act as such, and it must be possible to hold them properly accountable for those actions.

I am not proposing conservatism, inertia, or any other individual abrogation of responsibility. What I am suggesting is that if Singer, the reader, and I are concerned to do something to assist the most marginalized and desperate in our world, we must not rest content with a purportedly "practical ethics" that is misleading and potentially dangerous because of its methodological individualism and limited scope—temporal and spatial. The last thing we can afford to be is ahistorical, acontextual, and noninstitutional in our approach to global poverty relief. We need a political philosophy.

WHAT CAN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY CONTRIBUTE?

There are three broad components necessary for such a political philosophy: a *political economy* that charts the causal dynamics of the global economy and indicates the extent to which these could be controlled;[21] a *theory of justice* that supplies a metric for evaluating goals and derives a set of principles with which to approach the problems of development; and a *political sociology* that encompasses and distinguishes the respective roles of individuals and various institutions in advancing these moral ends. In considering South African realities and

[19] Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," p. 108.

[20] Onora O'Neill, "Agents of Justice," *Metaphilosophy* 32 (January 2001), pp. 180-95.

[21] John Dunn has repeatedly stressed the centrality of these questions to political understanding. See his *The Cunning of Unreason* (London: HarperCollins, 2000).

Marxist thought, I have said something about the first; I now examine dimensions of the remaining two by contrasting John Rawls's approach to global justice with that of Singer.

Rawls's groundbreaking *A Theory of Justice* (1971) begins with the recognition that society is a scheme of cooperation for mutual advantage. The primary determinant of how well each of us fares is a set of basic social institutions and laws that embody certain principles of justice. In *The Law of Peoples* (1999) Rawls extends this idea to international society.[22] He asks, in short, what basic laws and institutions form fair bases for cooperation between "peoples"—or what I have elsewhere called "thin states."[23] Each of these thin states is a national political structure, one that is nonaggressive toward others and takes members' interests into account—at least as members of ethnic, religious, and other groups. Rawls then develops a conception of justice appropriate to an ideal Society of Peoples or "thin state system." When it comes to distributive issues related to poverty relief, Rawls argues that decent and liberal peoples do have an obligation to assist burdened societies (that is, developing countries unable to maintain well-ordered regimes). Nevertheless, as Singer points out, Rawls emphasizes that "a change of culture"—by which Rawls means the political system as well as ethos[24]—is most crucial to ensuring that the lives of individuals within such societies go better.

Singer is deeply critical of this approach. He writes that Rawls's "emphasis on the need for a change of culture leaves untouched the plight of individuals who are dying of starvation, malnutrition, or easily preventable diseases *right now*, in countries that presently lack the capacity to provide for the needs of all their citizens."[25]

In one respect, Singer and I are entirely in agreement: by placing states (along with the ethnic and religious groups they contain) at the center of his ideals of justification and justice, Rawls erroneously prioritizes group identities and national citizenship over individual moral claims.[26] Rawls also fails to take account of the extent to which people's life chances within a state, and the political cultures of that state, are affected by structures and events beyond its borders and control.[27] But Singer is asserting more than this. He thinks that it is unhelpful and irresponsible, while thousands are dying and institutions are slow to reform, to focus on an ideal theory of justice—a compelling conception of the basic institutions of a just society. This fierce accusation is surely mistaken. As I now want to show, ideal theory *serves as a valuable orienteering mechanism for action right now.* As such, along with a focus broadly on political culture, it better serves the poor than does the "Singer solution."

An ideal conception of justice is very far from the atrociously nonideal conditions in developing countries; but, for judging potential courses of action such a metric and set of principles is indispensable, for seven reasons.

1. By having the appropriate ideal ends in view, we can distinguish courses of action and institutional change that get us closer to or farther from these aims; we are not condemned to a

[22] John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

[23] Andrew Kuper, "Rawlsian Global Justice: Beyond the Law of Peoples to a Cosmopolitan Law of Persons," *Political Theory* 28 (October 2000), pp. 640-74.

[24] Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, pp. 57-85.

[25] Singer, "Outsiders," p. 12 (italics in original).

[26] Kuper, "Global Justice," pp. 645-53.

[27] See some of the excellent essays by Thomas Pogge collected in *World Poverty and Human Rights* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2002).

reactive development strategy. And where we are forced by adverse conditions to make difficult or tragic choices, we will not unwittingly make suboptimal compromises.[28]

2. By focusing on the social system, and on the ways in which others are vulnerable to us, we take account of the context and consequences of individual agency. Actors who consider their location and capacities relative to other role-players are more effective in coordinating collective action, and better at channeling their individual efforts to produce cumulative benefits.[29]

3. A structure-sensitive focus leads us to emphasize actions' indirect and long-term consequences for a social system's capacities to provide for the needy. This emphasis is the cornerstone of sustainable development rather than ad hoc interventions.

4. We will not uncritically support simple equality, since we can recognize that some inequalities can be justified—on the grounds that they improve the lot of the most needy or of all of us.[30] (Some attention to incentives, for example, is surely realistic.) Singer, on the other hand, has no criteria for distinguishing fair from unfair asymmetric distributions.

5. A systemic account constantly directs our attention to the need for an explanatory and predictive political economy, one that sets realistic limits to our ideal theories. This makes for relevant and realistic, not naïve, idealism.

6. A more complex causal story also reminds us to avoid a Singerian tendency to treat active individuals in developing countries almost wholly as recipients or moral patients.[31] Poor people are neither powerless nor ignorant in respect of important problems and opportunities for action; they need to be addressed as agents, capable of independent action as well as cooperative endeavor.

7. It becomes possible to identify the primary agents of justice and aid.[32] We ask, Which persons and institutions are capable of, and bear definite responsibility for, dealing with which individual and collective predicaments and opportunities? The "we" that Singer addresses are single and fairly undifferentiated wealthy individuals. The "we" that Rawls addresses are all individuals understood as organized into cooperative groups and societies. This is the beginning of a proper political sociology—even if it needs to be adjusted and developed further and is on the whole far less developed than that of Marx and Lenin.

Things do not all go Rawls's way. His sociology, for instance, is unjustifiably organicist and statist. He chooses to recognize the wrong collectives—ethnic, religious, and national groups—as the authoritative sources of value and valuation.[33] Those who think that the state, let alone the nation, is a guarantor of order and rights would do well to recognize that, from the time that a state system was effectively inaugurated in the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648, 150 million people have been

[28] Kuper, "Global Justice," pp. 658-67.

[29] For an empirical study of this kind of informed efficacy, from the perspective of the media as agents, see Andrew Kuper and Jocelyn Kuper, "Serving a New Democracy: Must the Media 'Speak Softly'?" *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 13, no. 4 (2001), pp. 355-76.

[30] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 60-108 and 258-84.

[31] My thanks to Sanjay Reddy for insisting on this point.

[32] O'Neill, "Agents of Justice." O'Neill has long argued, eloquently and persuasively, that we need to know the corresponding and specific agent of obligation if we are to have a clear conception of the content of rights and the plausibility of claiming them.

[33] Many of the problems of our world are problems not simply of distribution among states but of a state-centric system. A nesting of political structures that attempts to concentrate power around unitary, territorially differentiated loci of control is inescapably prone to conflict and misallocation. Such a system not only divorces the location of issues from the location of capability to resolve issues, but also encourages action to amplify a friend-foe dichotomy in politics. On these topics, see Kuper, "Global Justice," and David Held, Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt, and Jonathan Perraton, eds., *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 1999).

killed by their own governments. Marxists can hardly feel comfortably superior either, given some famously misguided notions about the privileged agent of political struggle, the proletariat (or its vanguard). Further, Marx did not accept that piecemeal institutional reforms could make a lasting difference to the lives of the poor. In his view, reforms serve as ultimately insignificant attempts by the ruling class to stave off revolution. Thus Marx lacked a differentiated account of the many possible agents of justice. None of these many mistakes should lead us to deny the centrality of sociological insight.[34] On the contrary, it should encourage us to carefully and critically identify complexes of agencies that do and might operate successfully in the face of global transformations.

Of course, an important thinker cannot be blamed for all that he or she has not done. What we may legitimately demand, however, is that he or she attempts to recognize and specify the limits of his or her own account. When a philosopher is as public and exhortatory as Singer, this kind of circumspection is a pressing requirement, lest his philosophy be taken as an unmediated basis for (possibly disastrous) action. Note that it is not a good reply to say that the economy will continue regardless of my or Singer's individual action: Singer intends that his philosophy be a basis for ethical and political movements (for example, animal rights) that do change the way a large number of people live, produce, and consume. As Singer once wrote: "I think that if you try to cover up the cracks in the ethic, you're likely to get a major crash in the long run."[35]

NO ROYAL ROAD TO POVERTY RELIEF

What might Singer reply along these several dimensions? In various places, he seems to have made four powerful and relevant points.[36] First, he accepts that not much weight should be placed on arguments from analogy, but maintains that these are useful devices for eliciting people's intuitions and focusing their thinking. Second, he is clear that, in considering how to act under conditions of complex interdependence, what is right for each individual to do "will depend on the story you believe," on which political-economic explanations and predictions you accept. Third, there is a very low probability of bringing about structural change, whereas there is a high probability of doing direct good through well-targeted donation. Fourth, he argues that there is no trade-off between private giving and governments' taking responsibility: if citizens give more, then governments will too, because governments tend to value what their citizens value; further, even if there is a trade-off, more good will be done by individual giving than harm done by the reduction in government aid; and, finally, the argument "governments bear primary responsibility" is generally an excuse for not giving.

I will consider these responses in turn. Singer's analogies do focus the mind, but they focus it on only one thing, or the wrong thing. As a result, they are likely to mislead in at least equal measure, and their use is justified if and only if there is a responsible fill-

[34] See the discussion of this point in Quentin Skinner, Partha Dasgupta, Raymond Geuss, Andrew Kuper, Melissa Lane, Peter Laslett, and Onora O'Neill, "Political Philosophy: The View from Cambridge," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 10, no. 1, Tenth Anniversary Issue (2002), pp. 1-19.

[35] Singer, "What's Wrong with Killing?" from "Practical Ethics" (1993), reprinted in *Writings on an Ethical Life*, pp. 125-45, at p. 125.

[36] Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," pp. 114-16; "Outsiders," pp. 3, 5-10; "The Singer Solution to World Poverty," pp. 122-24; and *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 218-63.

ing out and adjustment of the analysis and injunctions that seem to flow from such one-dimensional examples. "It will depend on the story you believe" does not meet these criteria. On this ultrawide specification, one seems compelled to acknowledge that the sincere extreme neoliberal agent is deeply moral in his or her character and conduct, since he or she believes that conspicuous consumption and massive differentials in income are the most effective ways to alleviate the plight of the poor. Singer's metric for improvement—without a related set of political principles—leaves us with few grounds on which to dispute this narrow neoliberal interpretation. This presents us with a further large problem: an agent with this view is by no means unusual; in fact, given the dominance of Chicago-style economics and neoliberal business attitudes, that agent is probably the norm. Marxist and Rawlsian theories locate agents' outlooks against a background system of justice or injustice, and so contain the resources to make a critical judgment of this pervasive kind of case (Marx's theory of "false consciousness" and ideology is as relevant and disputable as ever). Singer's arguments—whether analogical, utilitarian, or vaguely intentionalist—are bereft of the necessary critical purchase.

As for Singer's remaining points, it may be true that well-targeted donations do significant good and do not reduce the amount of governmental aid or the extent to which governments and individuals take responsibility for development. Moreover, making people "aware of the shameful record of the U.S." is certainly worthwhile.[37] But an articulated philosophy is not going to recommend suboptimal (if not counterproductive) courses of action, and so we need to know from Singer which kinds of production and consumption, investment and savings, we should abandon and which are necessary and the most beneficial to global development and poverty relief. We have seen that the brute everything-in-excess-of-$30,000 donation rule should *not* apply.

Finally, let's address Singer's remaining point that governments' policies mirror the private policies of their citizens. Well, sometimes they do, but sometimes they are in direct contrast. In the United States, after all, the absence of taxation and state intervention to assist the needy at home is constantly justified on the basis that voluntary donation and other forms of charity are preferable. We need to know from Singer which courses of action, if widely adopted, will provoke which kinds of response from which agents. Should we become activists or active import consumers or both? Which campaigns for increased private aid will encourage more governmental foreign aid, and which will provoke a reactive decline? Should we lobby governments to place democratizing conditions on loans, or will that express and entrench existing power structures? These questions must be asked and answered responsibly. There is a great difference between making relatively wealthy people conscious of widespread suffering, on the one hand, and helping individuals and manifold massive institutions to become effective agents of justice and aid on the other.

Multiple questions do not constitute excuses for failing to make the world a better place. Rather, they are an acknowledgment that "moral experts"—to adopt a term from one of Singer's first articles—concerned with effective praxis have an obligation to provide a tougher, more nuanced and accurate picture of the temporal, spatial, and causal considerations that operate

[37] Singer, "Outsiders," p. 14.

at great scale. Singer himself once wrote: "Caring about doing what is right is, of course, essential, but it is not enough, as the numerous historical examples of well-meaning but misguided men indicate."[38]

CONCLUSION: COSMOPOLITAN PATHS TO POVERTY RELIEF

If my arguments are correct, the amount of donating and the extent of sacrifice are not the central issue; the real set of issues is how to redeploy resources and energy to roles and institutions within an extremely complex division of labor. Here are a few limited suggestions:

Consumption. Instead of giving up quality clothes and holidays, we may find ourselves buying clothes from ethical manufacturers and taking holidays in places that badly need the tourist dollar. The South African government's new "Brand SA" initiative makes exactly this kind of argument to elicit trade and tourism.

Production. The granting of mining and drilling concessions to corporations could be tied to obligations to manage medical and social needs arising out of HIV/AIDS in the regions in which companies wish to operate. This would be akin to extending the well-established principles of ecotourism to the heart of the big business of resource extraction. The urban section of the World Bank has begun to take this kind of approach.

Activism. Instead on relying solely on states to fund international organisations, or solely on individuals to fund NGOs, people can lobby for taxes on capital flows that give the UN and similar bodies a minimal independent revenue base. And they can take to the streets when a large corporation turns out to be violating labor standards or rights anywhere in the world.

Aid. One of the paradigmatic instances of effective intervention is the provision of microcredit and technology that enable access to wider opportunities for work, exchange, collective action, and the acquisition of skills. Some International Labour Organization and Grameen Bank projects are successful examples of this approach. Success in each case has been heavily dependent on systematic analyses as to the effects of incentives and of local norms and institutions, and on government help too.

Sensitive support of this kind can enable the poor to help themselves, and to engage in markets in ways that can also benefit themselves and others—including at times the relatively well-off. Yet innovation and transfer of such cost-lowering technology, for instance, require a social system that encourages some people to be entrepreneurs and engineers rather than lifeguards and development workers. Unfortunately, I doubt whether such entrepreneurs and engineers would play their roles if there were no selfish rewards (again, incentives can't responsibly be ignored).[39] But I am less skeptical of the possibility that they might become ethical consumers and investors, or be prepared to accept "social clauses" to profitable contracts.

Advocating a donation to Oxfam might conceivably in some contexts be the best means to noble ends, but this is by no means a foregone conclusion and universal remedy. Often, instead of telling individuals to dispense piecemeal charity—generally in the face of some new disequilibrium in the social system—we contribute better by cre-

[38] Peter Singer, "Moral Experts" (1972), reprinted in *Writings on an Ethical Life*, pp. 3-6, at p. 4.

[39] The need to take incentives seriously was one reason Rawls settled on "maximin" rather than "maximize" as a distributive principle.

ating, reforming, or participating in lifestyles and institutions that tend to generate resilient and ongoing inclusion in the benefits of cooperation.

The suggestions above derive from a cosmopolitan morality, insofar as our concern is with the capabilities, rights, and obligations of all individuals, not first with citizens of our own states while the distant poor come a distant second. But these suggestions are also political, in the good sense, taking account of the scale of societies and the complex interdependence of our shared world. Of course, none of these suggestions should lead us to rush headlong into action—microcredit, for instance, only works and is only appropriate in some situations.[40] We need to subject cosmopolitan proposals to detailed scrutiny, because the details of context and consequences matter for the poor.

I have repeatedly asked what difference philosophical theories make to the project of global poverty relief. It should by now be clear that an analysis from the broader perspective of political philosophy—as opposed to the simple individualist lens of a purportedly "practical ethics"—enables us to begin to distinguish peremptory directives from considered, politically aware, and sustainable strategies. But there remains the deep disjunct between the perspective of a system of global justice and the sedimented power structures of the current global order. Part of what a clearly articulated theory reveals is that some individuals' giving away income may do little to remedy this schism. While charity may produce improvements, it may at worst cause harm, or at least the relevant resources might be better used in another way. No doubt there are good reasons to support organizations that produce sustainable changes in the background framework of social institutions. But a systemic and long-term approach involves far more than targeting donations better. It requires a nuanced awareness that politics is ineradicably about scale and connectedness, and thus the coordinated action of multiple interdependent roles. We must play those roles not with an eye to making us, the relatively wealthy or developed country citizens, feel better, but with a view to which complexes of agencies and actions will generate the most sustainable positive momentum. This means that the language of sacrifice must generally give way to a deeper and better language: the language of social and economic cooperation conditioned by the interests of the globally disadvantaged.

For all their deficiencies, both Rawls and Marx have in place large parts of a political philosophy. Singer does not. It is badly needed if he wishes to provide guidance for engendering lasting improvements to the lives of the needy. Singer and political philosophy might benefit significantly from his turning his mind and formidable pen to this range of difficult questions. As Wittgenstein put it, with characteristically wry acuity: "If someone tells me he has bought the outfit of a tightrope walker I am not impressed until I see what he has done with it."[41]

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[40] The ILO Social Finance Unit itself insists on this point; see www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/finance.

[41] Cited in Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Vintage, 1991), p. 464.