

Pluralism about Global Poverty

JENNIFER C. RUBENSTEIN*

Theorists have identified a wide range of reasons why individual and collective actors have a moral responsibility to help alleviate global poverty. There is now widespread agreement that several of these reasons are valid. From the perspective of the poverty opponent, it might seem that the more reasons there are to alleviate poverty, the better. The difficulty is that different reasons for alleviating poverty point to different poverty-alleviating activities. This situation generates questions about both how actors should set priorities among different poverty-alleviating activities ('actor-centred' questions) and who should have primary responsibility for alleviating particular cases of poverty ('case-centred' questions). This article explains why actor-centred and case-centred questions are worth asking and sketches a promising way of responding to them.

The horrifying magnitude of severe poverty in the contemporary world has prompted many people, including many theorists and philosophers, to ask whether well-off actors have a moral responsibility to help alleviate severe poverty outside of their home countries.¹ These efforts have yielded an embarrassment of riches in the form of a long list of proposed reasons why well-off actors – including individuals, states, corporations and 'peoples' – might have such responsibilities.² These reasons, which I describe more fully below, include claims that actors should help to alleviate poverty if they caused, contributed to, benefited from or intended it; if they have the capacity to alleviate it at little cost to themselves; if they have ties of history, family, solidarity or friendship to those in need; or simply because of the terrible, yet avoidable, suffering that severe poverty generates.

Although there is ongoing disagreement about many of these claims, there is also widespread agreement that several of them are valid. I do not mean that there is a core

* University of Virginia (email: Rubenstein@virginia.edu). The author thanks Christian Barry, Barbara Buckinx, Ryan Davis, Gerald Doppelt, Chad Flanders, Peter Furia, John Goldberg, Robert Goodin, George Klosko, Troy Kozma, Thomas Pogge, Mike Ravvin, Robert Talisse, Claire Timperley, Leif Wenar, and three anonymous reviewers, as well as audiences at the Midwest Political Science Association Annual Meeting, a meeting of the Princeton Society of Fellows in the liberal arts, and the Vanderbilt seminar on Responsibility and Global Justice for extremely helpful comments on previous versions of this article.

¹ While things are indeed 'getting better' in some respects (see Charles Kenny, *Getting Better: Why Global Development is Succeeding – And How We Can Improve the World Even More* (New York: Basic Books, 2011)), global poverty remains an enormous problem in absolute terms (see Thomas Pogge, *Politics as Usual: What Lies Behind the Pro-Poor Rhetoric* (New York: Polity Press, 2010)). I assume that well-off actors can in fact help alleviate global poverty, but I take no position here as to what form this 'help' should take. Indeed, it might not consist of help at all, but rather of powerful actors removing obstacles that they themselves previously placed in front of poor people, or working in solidarity with poor people to make institutions and practices fairer and more inclusive.

² I assume that poor people who do not wish to be poor have primary responsibility for alleviating their own poverty, but that they often cannot escape poverty entirely on their own. There undoubtedly are some poor people who are morally blameworthy for their own poverty, but I assume that such cases constitute a small proportion of the extant severe poverty in the world. Moreover, even if people are at least partly to blame for their own poverty, it does not follow that they or their children should be left to die or suffer horribly as a result (see Elizabeth Anderson, 'What is the Point of Equality?', *Ethics*, 109 (1999), 287–337).

group of universally accepted reasons why well-off actors are obliged to help alleviate global poverty.³ Rather, there is widespread agreement that several such reasons are valid – even though there is disagreement about *which* reasons are valid. I will call the latter view (that there are several valid moral reasons to alleviate global poverty) ‘pluralism about reasons to alleviate global poverty’ or ‘global poverty pluralism’ for short.⁴

This article explores the implications of global poverty pluralism for how we conceptualize and allocate responsibility for alleviating severe poverty at the global level.⁵ I will therefore assume that there are, in fact, several valid moral reasons to alleviate global poverty. If true, this proposition at first appears to be entirely good news for poverty opponents: the more routes there are to the conclusion that advantaged people ought to do more to help alleviate global poverty, the better. There is no dearth of severe poverty to be addressed – and so, it would seem, no need to be concerned about a surfeit of reasons to address it.

However, what initially looks like an unmitigated good has two unexpected drawbacks. First, as the list of accepted reasons why well-off actors are obliged to help alleviate global poverty has grown longer, it has become, paradoxically, more difficult to determine which poverty-alleviating activity or activities any given well-off actor should undertake.⁶ This is because *different reasons to alleviate poverty often* (though not always) *point to different poverty-reducing activities*. For example, if an actor caused poverty in one place but can alleviate it most efficiently elsewhere, causality-based reasons for alleviating poverty would prompt the actor to undertake different activities than would efficiency-based reasons. Acting on causality-based reasons would also likely lead the actor to alleviate less poverty overall than would acting on efficiency-based reasons, because only the latter type of reason prioritizes alleviating as much poverty as possible. The more accepted reasons there are to alleviate poverty, therefore, the larger the *quantity* and the greater the *diversity* of poverty-alleviating activities any given actor is likely to have reason(s) to undertake.

This is all still well and good from the perspective of the poverty opponent. The problem arises when the list of poverty-alleviating activities that an actor has reason(s) to undertake becomes so long that it is impossible or overly burdensome for the actor to undertake all of these activities – or the actor simply refuses to undertake all of them.

³ This article’s vocabulary – in particular the discussion of ‘wealthy actors’ who ‘help’ to ‘alleviate poverty’ – has an unfortunate top-down and apolitical ring to it. I wish I had been able to find a more political vocabulary to concisely express the ideas presented here. But while form and content can never be entirely extricated, the argument of this essay is not intrinsically top-down: even the most democratic global poverty pluralist has to decide what to do and with whom to work, and so must address the questions discussed in this article.

⁴ According to Mason, “[t]he word “pluralism” generally refers to the view that there are many of the things in question (concepts, scientific world views, discourses, viewpoints etc.)’. See Elinor Mason, ‘Value Pluralism’, in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2008 Edition, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2008/entries/value-pluralism>, (2006).

⁵ I use ‘poverty,’ ‘global poverty’ and ‘severe poverty’ interchangeably to refer to the absence of the basic capabilities necessary to lead a decent and dignified life, including the capability to procure adequate food, clothing, housing, medical care, basic education and protection from abuse (see Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000)). I focus on severe poverty because it has been of such intense interest to theorists and philosophers, but many of the arguments presented here extend to other morally important global issues. For example, in a discussion of similar themes, Miller focuses on ‘instances of deprived or suffering people’ (see David Miller, ‘Distributing Responsibilities’, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 9 (2001), 453–71). As I discuss at the end of this essay, we should avoid strictly defining the boundaries of these issues in advance.

⁶ By ‘activity’ I mean not only one-off, small-scale acts like digging a well, but also longer-term, larger-scale initiatives, campaigns, policies, etc.

In these cases, decisions must be made by the actor (and/or those able to pressure or control the actor) about which poverty-alleviating activities the actor should prioritize. I will call questions about these decisions *actor-centred* questions.

ACTOR-CENTRED QUESTION: If an actor has many reasons to alleviate global poverty, and these reasons point to different poverty-alleviating activities, yet doing all of the activities is impossible or overly burdensome (or the actor refuses to do all of them) how should the activities be prioritized?⁷

This question might at first seem nitpicky or churlish. Should not actors who help alleviate poverty retain discretion over how they do so? Sometimes, yes. But in other cases, actors do have good moral reasons to prioritize one poverty-alleviating activity over another – or so I shall argue. In addition, without answers to these questions, global poverty pluralists can offer only a very vague account of actors' moral responsibilities to help alleviate global poverty. This vagueness, in turn, can make it easier for actors to evade their responsibilities. In short, global poverty pluralists should want to find answers to actor-centred questions both because finding the right answer – if there is one – is morally important in its own right and because having *any* answer makes it easier to hold actors accountable for doing their part to help alleviate global poverty.

Alongside actor-centred questions, global poverty pluralism also raises what I will call *case-centred* questions.

CASE-CENTRED QUESTION: If there are several reasons to alleviate a particular case of severe poverty, and these reasons suggest that several different actors are morally responsible for this case, yet there is a need to assign responsibility more precisely (to one or a few actors), which actor(s) should be deemed most morally responsible for addressing this case?

Global poverty pluralism generates case-centred questions because the more reasons to alleviate global poverty that are recognized as valid, the more likely it is that several actors can plausibly be assigned responsibility for alleviating or helping to alleviate any given case of severe poverty. From the perspective of the poverty opponent, this might seem entirely positive (just as a given actor having several reasons to undertake poverty-alleviating activities also at first seemed entirely positive). In particular, it might seem as if the more actors there are that can be deemed responsible for alleviating a given case of severe poverty, the more likely it is that the case will be addressed. However, when many different actors can plausibly be assigned responsibility, it can be easier for each of them to pass the buck to someone else. This is the second of the two drawbacks to global poverty pluralism mentioned above. To avoid this outcome, it is sometimes desirable to ask which actor (or small group of actors) is *most* morally responsible for alleviating poverty in a given case. We should want to answer case-centred questions both because it is morally important that the actors that are ultimately held politically, economically or legally responsible for alleviating a particular case of severe poverty are the most morally responsible for alleviating it (so far as this can be determined) and because answering case-centred questions can strengthen accountability for alleviating global poverty.⁸

⁷ If an actor has several reasons to alleviate poverty, but these reasons all point to the same (doable) activity, then actor-centred questions are of intellectual interest, but lack practical relevance.

⁸ I return to this issue in Section 4.

Actor-centred and case-centred questions are closely connected. They differ primarily in their perspective: actor-centred questions evaluate responsibility for alleviating global poverty from the perspective of a particular actor. They ask which poverty-alleviating activities that actor should prioritize when it has different (sets of) moral reasons to undertake different poverty-alleviating activities. In contrast, case-centred questions assess responsibility for alleviating global poverty from the perspective of a particular case of poverty. They ask which actor(s) should be held responsible for helping to alleviate that case when different actors have different (sets of) moral reasons to do so.

In the rest of this article, I explain why actor-centred and case-centred questions are worth asking, discuss why answering them is difficult, and sketch what I see as the most promising way to respond to them. Even though the arguments presented here are necessarily rather schematic and abstract, I hope to contribute to our understanding of actual, on-the-ground decisions about poverty alleviation. In the next section, I describe what I mean by ‘global poverty pluralism’ and suggest that it is a plausible view. Section 2 shows how global poverty pluralism generates actor-centred and case-centred questions. It then addresses several objections to even asking these questions in the first place. In Section 3, I examine three strategies for responding to actor-centred and case-centred questions; I argue that the first two strategies fail, while the third is more promising. In Section 4, I consider what recourse might be available to poverty opponents when answers to actor-centred and case-centred questions conflict with maximally alleviating global poverty. I conclude by situating actor-centred and case-centred questions within the context of debates about, and political responses to, global poverty.

1. THE PLAUSIBILITY OF PLURALISM ABOUT GLOBAL POVERTY

I begin by briefly describing seven moral reasons to alleviate global poverty that theorists and philosophers have endorsed. My goal is to show that global poverty pluralism is a widely held view: not only have many moral reasons to alleviate poverty been proposed, but many authors endorse several of these reasons. In so doing, I will also show (without defending this point explicitly) that these reasons really are different from each other. Boundaries between reasons – that is, where one ends and another begins – are not entirely rigid or given. Indeed, there are often several plausible ways to distinguish between two or more reasons. For example, while I group ‘cause poverty’ and ‘help to cause poverty’ together as one moral reason to help alleviate poverty, they could be construed as different reasons.⁹ But just because boundaries are fuzzy does not mean that they do not exist: you and I can agree that there are several distinct moral reasons to alleviate global poverty while disagreeing about precisely how to distinguish among them.

This list of moral reasons to alleviate poverty is not exhaustive. Moreover, some of the reasons are more widely accepted than others. But they give a sense of the range of ‘mid-level’ sources of moral responsibility for alleviating global poverty that a global poverty pluralist might endorse. To be precise, these are proposed reasons why actors are (1) morally responsible *for alleviating* severe poverty; that is, reasons why they would be blameworthy for not alleviating it. This is different from (2) being morally responsible for *the existence of* severe poverty. It is also different from (3) having *caused* severe poverty.

⁹ Christian Barry, ‘The Contribution Principle: Its Meaning and Significance for Allocating Responsibility to Address Acute Deprivation’, doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 2005.

While (3) often leads to (2) and (2) often leads to (1), these types of claims are analytically distinct and can describe different situations. An example of (1) on its own is the fire fighter who is responsible for fighting fires, but is not causally or morally responsible for fires occurring. An example of (2) on its own is a situation in which a child drowns because her parent, who cannot swim, was absorbed in a novel at the beach: the parent is at least partly morally responsible for her child having drowned, but not causally responsible for the child drowning or morally responsible for saving the child (because the parent cannot swim).¹⁰ An example of (3) on its own is a toddler who accidentally falls on another child and injures him: the toddler is causally responsible for injuring the other child, but is not morally responsible for the injury occurring or for ensuring that the injured child receives medical attention. What follows, then, are seven reasons, analogous to (1) above, for why actors are morally responsible for alleviating severe poverty.¹¹

1. The *causal* reason: one should help to alleviate the severe poverty that one caused, helped to cause or to which one contributed (directly or indirectly). The most prominent contemporary defender of this view is Thomas Pogge, who argues that ‘severe poverty is an ongoing harm we [“citizens of the rich countries”] inflict upon the global poor’.¹² Pogge and other proponents of this view argue that actors should stop causing the severe poverty that they are currently causing and provide reparations for severe poverty that they caused in the past.

On some accounts, the causal relationships that generate responsibility for alleviating poverty can be quite indirect. For example, Iris Young argues that ‘all actors who contribute by their actions to the structural processes that produce injustice have responsibilities to work to remedy these injustices’.¹³ Pogge himself sometimes suggests that actors ‘cause’ global poverty when they impose a system of rules on the social order that results in more poverty than would have resulted from another possible system of rules.¹⁴ For Richard Miller, it is not causing harm, but rather exploiting the poor by taking advantage of their weak bargaining position, that generates strong moral responsibilities.¹⁵ While causal responsibility is often seen as a strong source of moral responsibility to alleviate global poverty, it is not necessarily sufficient. For example, a poor street vendor who unintentionally drives another vendor into poverty by selling the same goods at lower prices does not necessarily have a moral responsibility to assist that other vendor.¹⁶

¹⁰ Miller, ‘Distributing Responsibilities’.

¹¹ Noteworthy reasons left out of this list include those based on human rights, religious duty and virtue ethics. I also exclude non-moral reasons, such as self-interest, and moral reasons for undertaking other activities that have the positive externality of helping to alleviate severe poverty.

¹² Thomas Pogge, ‘Severe Poverty as a Violation of Negative Duties’, *Ethics and International Affairs*, 19 (2005), 55–83, p. 55. See also Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002); Pogge, *Politics as Usual*. Caney discusses some practical difficulties with acting on causal responsibility in the context of global warming (see Simon Caney, ‘Environmental Degradation, Reparations, and the Moral Significance of History’, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 37 (2006), 464–82).

¹³ Iris Young, ‘Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model’, *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 23 (2006), 102–30, pp. 102–3. Young distinguishes her ‘social connection’ model from the ‘liability model’, which is closely associated with causation, although the social connection model also makes ‘reference to causes of wrongs’.

¹⁴ Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*, p. 201.

¹⁵ Richard Miller, *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁶ Miller, ‘Distributing Responsibilities’; Joel Feinberg, *Harm to Others* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

2. The *intention* reason: actors should help to alleviate global poverty if they intended to cause it. As Christian Barry argues, and as I discuss further below, this reason seems to have force primarily when it accompanies the causal reason: an intention to cause poverty that was formed and acted upon successfully would seem to generate a stronger obligation than an intention that was only formed but not acted upon, or an intention that was formed and acted upon unsuccessfully.¹⁷ The issue of intentions is relevant to the issue of global poverty because many actors, ranging from states to corporations, have an interest in keeping particular groups powerless – which often means keeping them poor.

3. The *capacity* reason:¹⁸ one should help to alleviate global poverty because one can do so. Although this reason can function on its own, there is often a deeper reason underlying it, which explains *why* we should help to alleviate global poverty when we can do so. Arguments that invoke these deeper reasons also often place an upper limit on what the capacity to alleviate poverty requires of those who have this capacity.

a. *Humanitarian reasons*: classical humanitarianism and (by some accounts) Good Samaritanism and the Duty of Rescue state that one should provide life-saving aid to individuals with urgent needs because of their innate dignity as persons.¹⁹ Here, ‘can implies ought’ due to the normative force of some conception of human dignity. Because classical humanitarianism focuses on preserving life with dignity, it imposes a cut-off point above which aid is no longer required (even of the actor who has the capacity to provide additional aid).

b. *‘Equal moral persons’*: Rawls argues that there is a ‘natural duty’ of ‘mutual aid’ that ‘obtain[s] between all as equal moral persons’.²⁰ This duty requires ‘helping another if he is in need or jeopardy, providing that one can do so without excessive risk or loss to oneself’.²¹ Like humanitarian duties, this duty is also owed by every person to every other person (not only one’s co-citizens) and has a cut-off point.

c. *Utilitarianism*: different utilitarians give different explanations of why utility should be maximized. Some base their arguments in a conception of equality, others in the importance of increasing utility for its own sake.²² However, they all pair the capacity reason with a requirement that actors alleviate poverty as efficiently as possible up to the

¹⁷ Barry, ‘The Contribution Principle’, Ch. 2.

¹⁸ My thanks to two anonymous reviewers for help with this reason, including suggesting the term ‘capacity’. See also Miller, ‘Distributing Responsibilities’.

¹⁹ Hugo Slim, ‘Relief Agencies and Moral Standing in War: Principles of Humanity, Neutrality, Impartiality and Solidarity’, *Development in Practice*, 7 (1997), 342–52; Jeremy Waldron, ‘Welfare and the Images of Charity’, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 36 (1986), 463–82; John Kleinig, ‘Good Samaritan’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 5 (1976), 382–407; David Miller, *Principles of Social Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 75–6; Bernard Williams, ‘Is International Rescue a Moral Issue?’ *Social Research*, 62 (1995).

²⁰ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice, Revised Edition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 98.

²¹ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice, Revised Edition*, p. 99. In *The Law of Peoples*, Rawls argues that well ordered societies have a duty to aid ‘burdened societies’ become ‘well ordered’, not necessarily to escape poverty (see John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples with the Idea of Public Reason Revisited* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), Section 15). There is continuity between the natural duty of mutual aid in *Theory of Justice* and the duty to aid burdened societies in *The Law of Peoples: in Theory of Justice*, Rawls says that ‘one aim of the law of nations is to assure the recognition of these [natural] duties in the conduct of states’ (Rawls, *Theory of Justice, Revised Edition*, p. 99).

²² Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy Second Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), Ch. 2.

point that utility is maximized (which might require passing over the poorest individuals or groups).²³

4. The *associative* reason: one should help to alleviate the poverty of those to whom one has associative ties. Such ties might be based on friendship, family, physical proximity, shared political commitments or political community, among others.²⁴ Associative responsibilities are a double-edged sword when it comes to global poverty. On the one hand, they can motivate the transfer of significant resources from well-off and moderately poor people in wealthy countries to much poorer people in poor countries. For example, members of particular religions aid their co-religionists; former refugees aid current refugees, and recent migrants send billions of dollars in remittances annually to their families.²⁵ On the other hand, claims about associative duties can be used to justify prioritizing aid to a specific group, such as one's compatriots, even if members of that group are less poor or more expensive to assist than non-members.²⁶

5. The *benefiting* reason: actors should help to alleviate severe poverty if they have benefited from it, or from something that caused it, directly or indirectly. Norbert Anwander argues that benefiting from others' severe poverty is not wrong in and of itself, but when one benefits from another's poverty, one has a positive duty to help alleviate it – regardless of whether that poverty was caused by unjust treatment by third parties or by bad luck.²⁷ For example, if Zora benefited because vandals burned down her competitor Ray's store, thereby rendering Ray destitute, Zora has a duty, akin to the duty of gratitude, to use some of her additional earnings to help Ray get back on his feet. For Anwander, then, contributing to severe poverty and benefiting from it provide independent sources of responsibility for alleviating global poverty. In contrast, Thomas Pogge implies that benefiting from global poverty does not generate responsibilities on its own, but rather increases the responsibilities of those who also help to cause global poverty.²⁸ For Pogge, in other words, the benefiting reason to alleviate poverty only comes into effect in the presence of the causal reason.

²³ Peter Singer, 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1 (1972), 229–43; Peter Singer, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Peter Singer, 'Outsiders: Our Obligations to Those Beyond Our Borders', in Deen K. Chatterjee, ed., *Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 11–32; Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save* (New York: Random House, 2009); Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

²⁴ Miller, 'Distributing Responsibilities'; Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Plurality and Equality* (United States of America: Basic Books, 1983); Kok-Chor Tan, *Justice Without Borders: Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism and Patriotism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Barry, 'The Contribution Principle'; Niko Kolodny, 'Do Associative Duties Matter?', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 10 (2002), 250–66; Samuel Scheffler, *Boundaries and Allegiances* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Some authors argue that there is an important moral difference between ties of friendship and family, on the one hand, and ties of nationhood and co-citizenship on the other.

²⁵ According to *The New York Times*, migrants sent \$300 billion home in 2006. See Jason deParle, 'In a World on the Move, a Tiny Land Strains to Cope', *The New York Times*, 24 June 2007. The World Bank reports that \$167 billion in remittances was sent to developing countries in 2005 (see World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects 2006: Economic Implications of Remittances and Migration*, November 2005).

²⁶ See, for example, Tan, *Justice Without Borders*.

²⁷ Norbert Anwander, 'Contributing and Benefiting: Two Grounds for Duties to the Victims of Injustice', *Ethics and International Affairs*, 19 (2005), 39–45. See also Barry, 'The Contribution Principle'; Pogge, 'Severe Poverty as a Violation of Negative Duties'; and Caney, 'Environmental Degradation, Reparations, and the Moral Significance of History'.

²⁸ Pogge, 'Severe Poverty as a Violation of Negative Duties', p. 197.

6. The *promise-based* reason: one should help to alleviate global poverty if one has promised to do so, implicitly or explicitly. Governments, for example, sometimes promise to provide foreign aid but then fail to follow through on their promises.²⁹ Promising to alleviate poverty creates a *prima facie* moral responsibility to do so, regardless of the reason for the promise.

7. The *office-based* reason: one should help to alleviate poverty if doing so is one's official duty. Andrew Sabl defines an 'office' as 'a position, devoted to a characteristic kind of action, whose existence is judged to serve worthy purposes, and whose grounding in those purposes gives rise to particular duties and privileges that derive from the position'.³⁰ Office-holders can be individuals, for example high-level employees of the World Bank or UNICEF; they can also be organizations or institutions, for example Save the Children or Oxfam. Office-based reasons do not explain why or how an entity comes to occupy an office, or even why the office exists. But they do explain why, once an actor occupies an office, he or she has a responsibility to perform the official duties associated with that office. Office-based reasons to alleviate poverty incorporate elements of other reasons, such as promising and benefiting, but they are not reducible to these other reasons, especially insofar as the perpetuation and entrenchment of the office itself has moral value.

Why Pluralism about Global Poverty is Plausible

Many people, including many philosophers, endorse several reasons for alleviating global poverty – including, but not limited to, one or more of the reasons listed above. For example, David Miller argues that what he calls his four 'criteria' (capacity, community, moral responsibility and causal responsibility) are widely agreed upon.³¹ Michael Green argues that most people accept both arguments based on causal responsibility and those based on special obligations.³² Thomas Pogge argues that there are positive, intermediate and negative duties to assist the global poor.³³ More generally, in everyday life we commonly recognize that several different moral reasons to alleviate global poverty seem persuasive.

²⁹ Oxfam International invoke this source of moral responsibility in a briefing paper (Oxfam International, 'The World is Still Waiting: Broken G8 Promises are Costing Millions of Lives', Briefing Paper No. 103, May 2007).

³⁰ Andrew Sabl, *Ruling Passions: Political Offices and Democratic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 1. See also Dennis Thompson, *Political Ethics and Public Office* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

³¹ Miller, 'Distributing Responsibilities'. See also Christian Barry, 'Global Justice: Aims, Arrangements, and Responsibilities', in Toni Erskine, ed., *Can Institutions Have Responsibilities? Collective Moral Agency and International Relations* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004).

³² Michael Green, 'Institutional Responsibilities for Global Problems', *Philosophical Topics*, 30 (2002).

³³ Pogge, 'Severe Poverty as a Violation of Negative Duties' and Thomas Pogge, 'Moral Priorities for International Human Rights NGOs', in Daniel A. Bell and Jean-Marc Coicaud, eds, *The Ethical Dilemmas of International Human Rights and Humanitarian NGOs: Reflections on a Dialogue Between Practitioners and Theorists* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2007). Other noteworthy volumes in which these issues are discussed by political philosophers and theorists include Daniel Weinstock, ed., *Global Justice, Global Institutions* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005); Deen Chatterjee, ed., *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Ian Shapiro and Lea Brilmayer, *Global Justice: Nomos XLI* (New York: New York University Press, 1999). Intermediate duties are those that 'prevent or mitigate harm that [they] otherwise will have caused or have participated in causing' (Pogge, 'Moral Priorities for International Human Rights NGOs', p. 251).

For example, many people recognized both capacity and associative reasons for the United States to aid Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. I conclude that there is enough agreement *that* several reasons to alleviate poverty are valid for it to be worth exploring the implications of global poverty pluralism – even though, as noted above, disagreement persists about *which* reasons are valid.

Different reasons to alleviate poverty are often associated with different, and seemingly incompatible, broader political and moral theories. For example, promise-based responsibility is often associated with libertarianism, the duty of aid with Rawlsian liberalism and capacity-based reasons with utilitarianism. But these associations are not one-to-one pairings: libertarians can endorse both promise-based and causal responsibility and liberals can endorse those two reasons along with several others, including the duty of aid. Moderate utilitarians can also endorse two or more moral reasons to alleviate poverty, as can people who do not subscribe to a single coherent moral theory. Generally speaking, few moral or political theories other than strong versions of utilitarianism are monistic, in the sense of endorsing only one mid-level moral reason to help alleviate global poverty. But even pluralistic theories do not provide the conceptual resources necessary to answer actor-centred and case-centred questions. In short, both proponents of several different moral and political theories, and people who do not subscribe to any specific moral or political theory, are likely to be global poverty pluralists yet lack resources for addressing actor-centred and case-centred questions.

2. ACTOR-CENTRED AND CASE-CENTRED QUESTIONS

While I have not proven that global poverty pluralism is definitively correct, I hope to have shown that it is an uncontroversial view that is likely to be widely held. I now want to suggest that it raises two types of questions that are rarely explicitly addressed in debates about responsibility for alleviating global poverty: actor-centred questions and case-centred questions.

Actor-centred Questions

As I stated above, actor-centred questions take the following form:

If an actor has many reasons to alleviate global poverty, and these reasons point to different poverty-alleviating activities, yet doing all of the activities is impossible or overly burdensome (or the actor refuses to do all of them) how should the activities be prioritized?

For example, should a multinational corporation operating in a poor country pay its workers a living wage, as promised, or clean up a chemical spill that it helped to cause, which is harming poor fishermen's livelihoods? Should a government prioritize aid to a country that it invaded and occupied on false pretences (even though such aid might be inefficient in terms of cost) or should it instead use that money to aid people elsewhere, where it could more effectively alleviate severe poverty?³⁴

³⁴ Here and throughout this article, I assume that outside actors selecting which cases of severe poverty to help alleviate are choosing among cases in which those affected want the sort of assistance or partnership that these outside actors are able to provide. Of course, sometimes those affected do not want external assistance or participation in their efforts to improve their own lives (or they do not perceive their lives as in need of improvement).

As these examples suggest, determining when actor-centred questions should even be asked involves making difficult moral and political judgements. This is because actor-centred questions assume that trade-offs among different poverty-alleviating activities must be made.³⁵ But assuming – or even grudgingly accepting – that a trade-off is necessary when it is not is tantamount to letting an actor off the hook for poverty reduction. For example, a corporation's insistence that it cannot possibly pay a living wage *and* clean up a chemical spill might be a ruse. It can be difficult to determine when an actor is *really* unable to act on all of the moral reasons to alleviate poverty that apply to it, when it is capable of acting on all of these reasons but doing so would impose an undue burden – and when the actor is simply trying to get away with doing less. Third parties and internal reformers must make practical political judgements about when to press an actor to fulfil all of (what they take to be) the actor's responsibilities, when to shift the focus to which sources of moral responsibility the actor should prioritize (which in turn requires asking actor-centred questions) and when to do both simultaneously.

These difficulties are compounded when the actor in question is large, public and internally complex, with many roles and constituencies, such as a government or multinational corporation. Yet while actor-centred questions can in principle be asked about any type of actor, they tend to be most revealing when they are asked about large public collective actors, rather than about private individuals. This is because large, public actors tend to have a greater capacity to alleviate poverty, and more (moral and non-moral) reasons to do so, than private individuals. Unlike large-scale public actors (especially governments), private individuals generally cannot build pipelines, colonize countries, authorize humanitarian military intervention or sign inter-state agreements on poverty reduction. Large-scale public actors are also more likely than individuals to fulfil a few of their responsibilities with great fanfare, so as to distract from their failure to respond adequately to other, perhaps more important or pressing, responsibilities. Finally, public actors tend to have greater responsibilities of transparency and non-arbitrariness than private individuals, including responsibilities to justify their actions and decisions to others. These justifications can include answers to actor-centred questions.

Actor-centred questions are, however, still relevant to private individuals. The existence of democratic governments, transnational advocacy coalitions and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) makes it easier for individuals to support a diverse array of poverty-fighting activities. Not only can individuals choose which poverty-alleviating activities (if any) they will support in response to their own moral responsibilities, they can also choose whether and how to pressure governments, corporations and other large-scale public actors to undertake particular activities in response to their (the public actors') moral responsibilities.³⁶

While global poverty pluralists face actor-centred questions, global poverty monists (that is, people who think there is only one moral reason to alleviate global poverty) must also sometimes decide how to set priorities among different poverty-alleviating activities.

³⁵ For a broader discussion of the dangers of unwarranted assumptions about empirical constraints on normative reasoning, see Sanjay Reddy, 'The Role of Apparent Constraints in Normative Reasoning: A Methodological Statement and Application to Global Justice', *Journal of Ethics*, 9 (2005), 119–25.

³⁶ Sometimes pressuring third parties, for example by donating to an INGO seeking to reform the World Bank, is a way for individuals to discharge their own moral responsibilities. At other times pressuring third parties is morally optional, in which case it should take second priority to the individual discharging his or her own responsibilities.

For example, someone who thinks that causally contributing to global poverty is the only source of moral responsibility for alleviating global poverty might still not be able or willing to alleviate all of the poverty that he has helped to cause. He must therefore set priorities among different cases. But it is easier to set priorities among cases if one accepts only one reason to alleviate poverty than if one accepts many such reasons. When only one reason is accepted, the internal logic of that reason can guide the ranking of different cases. For example, if the reason that is recognized is causal responsibility, the actor might prioritize the poverty it helped to cause most directly; if the reason that is recognized is promise-based responsibility, an actor might fulfil its most explicit or overdue promises before its less explicit or overdue ones; if the reason is office-based responsibility, the actor might prioritize the duties that are most central to her office's mission over those that are less central.

In contrast, when several reasons to alleviate poverty are recognized as valid, the range of poverty-alleviating activities that a given actor has reason to undertake is likely to be larger and more diverse than when only one reason is so recognized. When several reasons are recognized as valid, it is also not possible to appeal to the internal logic of any one reason in order to set priorities among different activities. While the question for the global poverty monist who only acknowledges causal reasons is how to set priorities among the cases of severe poverty that he helped cause, the question for the global poverty pluralist is how to set priorities among (for example) providing reparations to some people, fulfilling official duties to the same people, honouring promises to others and working with another group whose poverty can be alleviated especially efficiently. Thus, if a corporation has a reparative duty to fund a water-improvement project in a town whose water supply it contaminated, but has promised to build a health centre in another town, it cannot use the underlying logic of either reason to choose between these activities. In short, the global poverty pluralist's recognition of several valid moral reasons to alleviate global poverty makes the task of setting priorities among different poverty-alleviating activities far more complicated than it is for the global poverty monist.

Case-centred Questions

Case-centred questions are similarly complex. Recall that these questions take the following form:

If there are several reasons to alleviate a particular case of severe poverty, and these reasons suggest that several different actors are morally responsible for this case, yet there is a need to assign responsibility more precisely (to one or a few actors), which actor(s) should be deemed *most* morally responsible for addressing this case?

David Miller offers an example of a case-centred question. Who, he asks, should be responsible for alleviating 'the current [in 2001] plight of Iraqi children who are malnourished and lack access to proper medical care[?]'³⁷ Likewise, one might also ask: who (if anyone) should be held responsible for alleviating poverty in the destitute towns around Nigerian oil pipelines? Who (if anyone) should be considered most responsible for alleviating poverty on a remote island whose economy is ruined by global climate change?

As with actor-centred questions, political judgement is required to decide when case-centred questions should even be asked. Just as actors can sometimes act on all of their

³⁷ Miller, 'Distributing Responsibilities'.

moral reasons to alleviate poverty, such that actor-centred questions do not arise, sometimes a particular case of severe poverty can be alleviated collectively (by all of those with some moral responsibility for addressing it) such that case-centred questions do not arise. In other situations, however, it is necessary to identify, from among those who have some moral responsibility to alleviate a case of severe poverty, the single actor or subset of actors who have the most responsibility for alleviating it.

Like actor-centred questions, case-centred questions can be asked about all types of actors, but are generally more fruitfully posed with regard to large, public actors. They are also far more challenging for global poverty pluralists than for global poverty monists. If causal responsibility, for example, were the only valid moral reason to alleviate poverty, then several actors might be considered morally responsible for alleviating a particular case of severe poverty because they all helped to cause it. However, because causal responsibility was seen as the only valid reason, it could help determine which actor (or actors) was most responsible: those with the most significant causal role. In contrast, if several reasons to alleviate poverty are recognized as valid, then not only are there likely to be a larger number of actors with a moral reason to help address a given case of severe poverty, but the internal logic of any one reason cannot be used to determine which actor or actors is most responsible for addressing it.

Three Objections

Before discussing how we might respond to actor-centred and case-centred questions, I want to briefly address three possible objections to even asking these questions in the first place. The first objection is that global poverty is *so* horrible that nit-picking about which poverty-alleviating activity is the most important for an actor to undertake, and which actors are most responsible for alleviating a given case of severe poverty, amounts to a kind of misrecognition of the situation at hand. According to this objection, it does not matter what reasons actors act on when they alleviate poverty, so long as they alleviate as much poverty as possible; likewise, it does not matter whether the most morally responsible actor is held responsible for alleviating a particular case of severe poverty, so long as that poverty is ameliorated.

I am sympathetic to the sense of urgency that motivates this objection, but I do not think the objection itself is persuasive. Strong versions of it seem to reject global poverty pluralism altogether in favour of the idea that the capacity reason is all that matters. Because I am interested in the challenges faced by global poverty *pluralists*, the issue of whether monists who endorse only the capacity reason find it hard to prioritize different activities falls outside of the purview of my analysis.³⁸ Weaker versions of the objection do not reject global poverty pluralism, but they do seem to place too little emphasis on the distinctiveness of reasons to alleviate poverty: if a reason is worth taking seriously as a reason to alleviate poverty, then it is worth doing the kind of poverty alleviation that the reason directs us to do. For example, if the causal reason provides grounds for alleviating poverty, then it provides a reason to alleviate the poverty that one has caused (insofar as that can be determined). And if it is worth doing the kind of poverty alleviation that a reason directs us to do, then it is worth asking how strong the reason is compared to other

³⁸ It has been extensively discussed elsewhere by critics of utilitarianism, for example: Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*; Bernard Williams, 'A Critique of Utilitarianism' in J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, eds, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

reasons, when different reasons demand different poverty-alleviating activities and not all reasons can be acted upon. This is not to deny that actors should retain some discretion in setting priorities among different poverty-alleviating activities. But I think the burden of proof is on those who want to claim that valid moral reasons to alleviate poverty have no action-guiding force beyond the general directive to alleviate poverty.

This response to the ‘too nitpicky’ objection applies primarily to actor-centred questions. With regard to case-centred questions, the rejoinder is that poor people often – and justifiably – care that resources are transferred, policies are created or political structures are reformed for the right reasons.³⁹ In particular, people who believe that they have been victims of injustice generally do not want to be paid to shut up and go away. They do not want a handout because they are poor. They want an official, public acknowledgment of past unjust treatment.⁴⁰ It is, to them, often a matter of justice that they receive these things from those who are most morally responsible for providing them. These justice- and recognition-based claims will not always trump other considerations. But they help explain why case-centred questions are not too nitpicky from the perspective of victims of injustice.

Case-centred questions are also important to those who might potentially be deemed morally responsible for alleviating a particular case of severe poverty. Fairness to them seems to require that the actor or actors who are finally held responsible should be those who are *most* responsible, morally speaking.⁴¹ So they are also unlikely to find the ‘too nitpicky’ objection persuasive.

A final reason why poverty opponents should not view actor-centred and case-centred questions as too nitpicky is that, as I mentioned above, having answers to these questions makes it easier to hold actors accountable. As David Miller writes with regard to (what amount to) case-centred questions, ‘[r]esponsibility that is widely dispersed is no good, because then everyone will attempt to hang back in the hope that someone else will step in first, no one will be particularly liable to censure if the bad condition is not remedied, and so on’.⁴² This point also applies to actor-centred questions: setting priorities among the various poverty-alleviating activities that an actor has reason to undertake makes that actor’s responsibilities more specific, and thereby makes it easier for third parties to hold that actor accountable. Again, it is not always possible to answer actor-centred and case-centred questions, but the possibility of increasing actors’ accountability is a good reason to try.

A second, almost diametrically opposed, objection to asking actor-centred and case-centred questions is not that these questions are too nitpicky, but rather that they ask too much of actors that are already helping to alleviate global poverty. In other words, the obligation to alleviate poverty is what philosophers call an ‘imperfect’ duty: while actors have some responsibility to alleviate poverty, they retain the discretion to decide when, where, how and how much to do so.⁴³ This objection thus applies primarily to

³⁹ Nancy Fraser, ‘Rethinking Recognition’, *New Left Review*, 3 (2000). Discussing a somewhat different context, Pogge disagrees, arguing that poor people do not benefit from knowing that they were passed over for aid due to a fair procedure. At least the benefits are unlikely to outweigh the costs of running the lottery. See Thomas Pogge, ed., *Freedom from Poverty as a Human Right: Who Owes What to the Very Poor?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 255–74.

⁴⁰ Margaret Urban Walker, ‘Restorative Justice and Reparations’, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 37 (2006), 377–95.

⁴¹ I return to and qualify this statement in Section 4.

⁴² Miller, ‘Distributing Responsibilities’.

⁴³ Onora O’Neill, *Bounds of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); George Rainbolt, ‘Perfect and Imperfect Obligations’, *Philosophical Studies*, 98 (2000), 233–56.

actor-centred questions. It suggests that so long as actors alleviate some poverty, the reasons that they act on – and the specific cases of severe poverty they address – are up to them.

Yet while ‘charity’ is often considered the quintessential example of an imperfect duty, not all reasons to alleviate global poverty are imperfect duties. Obligations to fulfil promises and provide reparations for past harms are generally seen as ‘perfect’ duties, or toward the perfect end of the spectrum.⁴⁴ That is, they have determinate content and are owed to specific individuals. In addition, utilitarianism seems to transcend the perfect/imperfect duty distinction: it directs actors to provide aid in a very particular way – so as to maximize utility – but it does not give poor people a basis on which to make claims on third parties (except to say ‘you should help to alleviate our poverty, because doing so is the most efficient way to reduce poverty overall’). In short, because not all moral reasons to alleviate poverty are imperfect duties, actor-centred and case-centred questions cannot be dismissed as too demanding.

A third and final objection to asking actor-centred and case-centred questions is more pragmatic and political than philosophical. This objection holds that since many actors act on *few* (or none) of their moral reasons to help alleviate global poverty, it is ‘pie in the sky’ to spend time pontificating about which of these reasons is most important. I disagree. First, as mentioned above, even when an actor resists acting on its moral responsibilities, there are often morally motivated third parties that are willing and able to pressure that actor, such as citizens willing to pressure their government or activists willing to pressure corporations. Answers to actor-centred and case-centred questions can help these parties set their agendas and make public arguments. Second, straightforwardly acknowledging the conceptual and practical difficulties that arise when several reasons to alleviate poverty are recognized as valid might encourage more poverty alleviation by replacing a disconnected, overwhelming heap of reasons that point in different directions with a more coherent, actionable scheme.

3. THREE APPROACHES TO ANSWERING ACTOR-CENTRED AND CASE-CENTRED QUESTIONS

Having addressed some potential objections to asking actor-centred and case-centred questions, I now want to describe three possible approaches to answering them. The first two approaches have some initial appeal, though I will argue that neither is persuasive. The third approach is more promising.

Counting Reasons

One approach to answering actor-centred and case-centred questions is to prioritize those activities that actors have the most reasons to undertake. For example, if an NGO has office- and promise-based reasons to provide classes to a women’s cooperative, but only a promise-based reason to provide seeds to a farming cooperative, it would prioritize the former, because two reasons are better than one. Likewise, if one actor has two reasons to address a particular case of severe poverty and another actor has just one reason, responsibility would be assigned to the first actor. Alas, a moment’s reflection suggests

⁴⁴ George Rainbolt conceives of the perfect/imperfect distinction as a continuum rather than a dichotomy (see Rainbolt, ‘Perfect and Imperfect Obligations’).

that this approach is untenable. Not only can one strong reason outweigh two or more weak ones, but any such calculation would depend on how the boundaries among different reasons are drawn.

More generally, Christian Barry argues that reasons to alleviate poverty are not analogous to grains of sand that can simply be added up.⁴⁵ They are, he writes, more like atoms that, when combined in different configurations, create molecules with different properties. For example, as I stated above, intending to exacerbate poverty arguably does not, on its own, generate an obligation to help alleviate poverty. But when the intention to exacerbate poverty is combined with causal responsibility – when an actor both intends to cause poverty and succeeds in doing so – then having had the intention seems to increase the actor's responsibility to alleviate poverty even though intention on its own has no such effect. In short, because of these 'interaction effects' among different reasons, and because (as I argue below) different instantiations of reasons of the same type can be stronger or weaker, adding up reasons like grains of sand does not seem to be a reliable method for setting priorities among the poverty-alleviating activities a given actor could potentially undertake, or for assigning responsibility for alleviating a case of severe poverty to a specific actor.

Relying on a General Ranking of Reasons

A second possible approach to answering actor-centred and case-centred questions is to do so on the basis of an across-the-board ranking of different moral reasons to alleviate poverty. Two particular ways of ranking reasons come to mind: prioritizing 'negative' duties over 'positive' duties or prioritizing 'perfect' duties over 'imperfect' duties (mentioned above).⁴⁶ Henry Shue offers a concise account of these two distinctions:

If [a duty] is negative, it requires us not to do things. If it is positive, it requires us to do or provide things... If [a duty] is perfect, it is owed to specifiable individuals who have a right to its performance. If it is imperfect, it is not owed to specifiable individuals and no one can rightfully demand that its performance be directed at him.⁴⁷

Shue invokes these distinctions in the context of a broader argument in which he suggests that they are simplistic and can be misleading. But here they serve the useful purpose of helping to articulate two likely intuitions about how to answer actor-centred and case-centred questions.

According to both dichotomies, causal and promissory duties to alleviate poverty should always be prioritized over the duty of aid and duties based on the capacity to provide aid, because the former are both more negative and more perfect than the latter.⁴⁸ But this conclusion does not bear scrutiny. For example, the duty to save one person's life when one can do so at little cost to oneself appears to be stronger than the duty to avoid making another person slightly worse off. It might well be that *all else being equal*, negative duties are more pressing than positive duties and highly perfect duties are more pressing than less perfect ones. But this observation is not particularly relevant to actor-centred and case-centred questions. What matters for the purpose of answering actor-centred and case-centred questions is not that perfect duties are stronger than

⁴⁵ Barry, 'The Contribution Principle', Ch. 2.

⁴⁶ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 114.

⁴⁷ Henry Shue, 'Mediating Duties', *Ethics*, 98 (1988), 687–704.

⁴⁸ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 114.

imperfect duties or that negative duties are stronger than positive duties all else being equal, but rather how specific instantiations of these duties compare. In other words, the issue is not whether, for example, promise-based reasons in general are stronger than the duty of aid in general; rather, the question is about the relative force of *this particular* promise versus the duty to aid in *that particular* situation.

Put yet another way, each of the moral reasons to alleviate poverty described in Section 1 can be conceptualized as a series of concentric circles. The centre ring of each circle represents the strongest instantiation of that reason, while progressively larger rings, which are further from the centre, represent progressively weaker instantiations. For example, the centre ring of the causal reason might represent a situation in which the actor who caused poverty did so directly and acting alone. Outer rings of the causal reason might involve more indirect actions or other actors also playing a causal role. Thus, even if the centre ring of reason A (say, the duty of aid) is weaker than the centre ring of reason B (say, the causal reason), the centre ring of reason A might be stronger than the outermost ring of reason B. That is, a strong instantiation of the duty of aid might be stronger than a weak instantiation of the causal reason. So even if David Miller is correct that ‘our strongest remedial responsibilities are to those whose predicament we are *plainly* outcome responsible for creating’,⁴⁹ the duty to aid the victims of a recent natural disaster (a strong duty of aid) might still be more pressing than the duty to compensate poor people who one has only played a minor role in helping to make worse off (a weak causal responsibility).

The possibility of stronger and weaker versions of moral reasons to alleviate poverty supports the conclusion that an across-the-board ranking of reasons is unlikely to be a persuasive way to set priorities among different poverty-alleviating activities. This does not mean that there are no patterns in our considered judgements about the relative importance of different types of moral reasons to alleviate poverty. But it does suggest that these patterns are less robust than they might initially appear, especially when comparisons are being made – as they virtually always are – among situations that involve different numbers of reasons, different configurations of reasons, and strong versions of some reasons and weak versions of other reasons.

Context-specific Constellations of Reasons

I turn now to a third approach to answering actor-centred and case-centred questions. While far from perfect, it seems preferable to the two approaches described above. My proposed approach builds on David Miller’s suggestion for how to answer (what amount to) case-centred questions, which he calls the ‘connection theory’:

Our overriding interest is to identify an agent who can remedy the deprivation or suffering that concerns us, and in pursuit of that aim we fix on whoever is linked to [some patient] P according to one of the theory’s four criteria [capacity, community, moral responsibility and causal responsibility], about which there is widespread agreement. Where two or more of the principles apply, the theory tells us to look at the strength of the various connections... This means, of course, that when connections have to be weighed against each other, we can do no more than appeal to shared moral intuitions about which is the stronger.⁵⁰

Miller offers the connection theory as a response to case-centred questions, but it can easily be applied to actor-centred questions: it would simply say that an actor with

⁴⁹ David Miller, ‘Who is Responsible?’ *The Philosophers’ Magazine* (2006), p. 62, my emphasis.

⁵⁰ Miller, ‘Distributing Responsibilities’.

different reasons to alleviate poverty that point to different activities should prioritize those activities to which it has the strongest connection.

While Miller's theory is a good starting point, it needs to be developed to suit our purposes. We have seen that an adequate approach to actor-centred and case-centred questions must be attentive to interaction effects among different reasons. It must also acknowledge that, while some reasons might be *ceteris paribus* stronger than others, a strong version of a generally weak reason can be stronger than a weak version of a generally strong reason.⁵¹ I therefore propose that actors should set priorities among different poverty-alleviating activities – that is, they should answer actor-centred questions – on the basis of which activity they have the *strongest context-specific constellation of moral reasons* to undertake. Likewise, judgements about which actor or small group of actors is most morally responsible for alleviating a particular case of severe poverty – that is, responses to case-centred questions – should be based on who has the *strongest context-specific constellation of moral reasons* to address that case. This formulation's focus on 'constellations' of moral reasons acknowledges interaction effects; its attention to context acknowledges that different instantiations of a given reason can be stronger or weaker in different situations.

Identifying the strongest context-specific constellation of moral reasons cannot resolve disagreements about which moral reasons to alleviate poverty are generally valid, or about whether a given reason is stronger or weaker than another in a particular case.⁵² But it does suggest the kinds of factors – interaction effects and how context shapes the strength of different instantiations of reasons of the same type – that persuasive responses to actor-centred and case-centred questions must address. In so doing, it can help to shape and inform debates and judgements about actor-centred and case-centred questions.

4. REDUCING TRADE-OFFS BETWEEN ACTING ON THE STRONGEST CONTEXT-SPECIFIC CONSTELLATION OF MORAL REASONS AND MAXIMALLY ALLEVIATING POVERTY

Throughout this essay, I have discussed questions faced by actors who both oppose global poverty and are global poverty pluralists. Yet the argument so far highlights a tension between these two commitments: if one accepts a wide range of reasons to alleviate global poverty – that is, if one is a global poverty pluralist – then setting priorities based on the strongest context-specific constellation of moral reasons to alleviate poverty will not necessarily be consistent with maximally alleviating poverty. Maximally alleviating poverty entails always acting in ways that are consistent with efficiency considerations.⁵³

⁵¹ Miller acknowledges this in passing.

⁵² There is a debate about whether this sort of weighing of different reasons can be done in any meaningful way. On the broader issue of value commensuration and comparability, see the essays in Ruth Chang, ed., *Incommensurability, Incomparability and Practical Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), especially the Introduction and contributions by Elizabeth Anderson and Elijah Millgram. I cannot enter into this debate here, except to say that a) the worries voiced by Anderson and others about comparability in the realm of aesthetics do not apply to the case of global poverty and b) one can be quite skeptical about the possibility of comparing or commensurating different reasons for alleviating poverty but still find the conceptual clarification offered here conducive to at least marginally better decision making.

⁵³ Assuming that resources are scarce, such that alleviating poverty enables one to maximize poverty alleviation overall. Crucially, this does not mean being motivated by efficiency considerations. The literature on development and humanitarian aid is rife with examples of how efforts to alleviate poverty as efficiently as possible backfire because they are too focused on efficiency. On the

However, many moral reasons to alleviate poverty, such as causality-based, office-based and promise-based reasons, direct actors to undertake poverty-alleviating activities that are not necessarily maximally efficient.

So there are two values in play: acting on the basis of the strongest context-specific constellation of moral reason(s) to alleviate poverty and maximally alleviating poverty. These values will sometimes come into practical conflict with each other. In this section I consider several ways to reduce this conflict – that is, ways to avoid having to sacrifice acting on the basis of the strongest moral reasons in order to maximally alleviate poverty, or vice versa. Why should maximally alleviating poverty get this special treatment?⁵⁴ Why not ask how acting on the strongest context-specific constellation of moral reasons could be made more consistent with some other outcome, such as equalizing the burdens of poverty alleviation among the wealthy? The reason is simply that unchosen severe poverty in a world of plenty is a horrible thing for anyone to have to endure. This gives maximally alleviating poverty a special status that other goals do not have, even though they might also be important.

I will discuss two possible approaches to reducing these trade-offs, each of which exploits a different way in which responsibility is not only discovered (philosophically) but also created (politically). I am not suggesting that anyone has a duty to create responsibility in these two ways. Rather, my objective is to reveal the responsibility-creating potential or implications of activities that are, to some extent, already taking place. Poverty opponents who recognize these dynamics then have the option to undertake these activities themselves, support third parties that undertake them or simply recognize their poverty-alleviating potential.

Approach #1: Make Acting on the Strongest Moral Reasons More Effective at Maximally Alleviating Poverty

The first strategy to make acting on the strongest context-specific constellation of moral reasons more consistent with maximizing poverty alleviation is to alter the circumstances surrounding these reasons, so that acting on them has greater poverty-alleviating effects. Start with a non-poverty-related example: putting lifesaving equipment near the edge of a raging river makes it less costly for passers-by to save someone who is drowning. Whereas without the rescue equipment discharging the duty of rescue might require calling a rescue service that would then take time to arrive, the presence of the equipment makes acting on the limited demands of the duty of rescue more effective. Likewise, the existence of effective international NGOs that accept donations to alleviate severe poverty arguably makes it easier for individuals, corporations and governments in wealthy countries to help alleviate severe poverty in poor countries.⁵⁵ For many of these actors, acting on the basis of the capacity reason by donating to NGOs generates more poverty alleviation than would have been produced had they used their own capacities to make uncoordinated, piecemeal efforts to alleviate poverty on their own.⁵⁶

(Footnote continued)

consequentialist benefits of being motivated by non-consequentialist reasons, see Robert E. Goodin, *Utilitarianism as a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, Ch. 2; Philip Pettit, 'When Wrong is Right', *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 September 2005; Williams, 'A Critique of Utilitarianism'.

⁵⁴ I thank Leif Wenar for pressing this point.

⁵⁵ I address this issue extensively elsewhere.

⁵⁶ However, as I argue in *Between Samaritans and States: The Political Ethics of Humanitarian NGOs* (forthcoming), donors should not treat NGOs as 'do-gooding machines'.

Other technologies, practices and institutions can help people who are acting on the basis of various moral reasons to alleviate poverty generate more poverty alleviation than they could otherwise provide. For example, the associative reason can be made more effective by inducing wealthy actors to join institutional schemes that also involve poor people. Simon Caney argues that one drawback to the ‘institutional account’ of moral responsibility for alleviating global poverty is that it dissuades wealthy actors from joining institutional schemes involving poor people, because doing so will increase their moral responsibilities to those poor people.⁵⁷ I am making the converse point: if the prospect of developing a moral obligation is enough to keep actors from joining institutional schemes, then inducing them to join such schemes is enough to increase their moral responsibility. Poverty opponents therefore have reason to support such inducements, especially if they think actors will fulfil the moral responsibilities that develop as a result. Recent efforts by theorists and activists to show that various kinds of actors are already involved in institutional schemes that perpetuate global poverty function in a similar way: these arguments are attempts to show that widely accepted moral reasons to alleviate poverty – causal and associative reasons – apply more widely and with more force than was previously recognized. These arguments do not make acting on particular reasons more effective at alleviating poverty in the way that putting lifesaving equipment next to a raging river does; rather, they reveal that some actors’ responsibilities to alleviate poverty already require more poverty alleviation than had previously been recognized.

This strategy for making global poverty pluralism more consistent with maximizing poverty alleviation is not limited to altering institutional schemes. As the NGO example offered above suggests, it can also involve creating new actors. Making good judgements about case-centred questions requires openness to the possibility that perhaps the best (collective or institutional) actor to hold responsible for alleviating a particular case of severe poverty does not yet exist, but could be created from scratch or constructed by merging or retooling existing collective or institutional actors. While actors often create other actors in order to avoid responsibility and shield themselves from accountability, NGOs, community-based organizations and social movements illustrate the potential benefit of creating new actors, especially when these new actors can alleviate poverty more efficiently or have more political room to manoeuvre than existing actors. While this possibility is most relevant to case-centred questions, it also has implications for actor-centred questions, in that significantly re-shaping an existing actor so as to modify its capacities or role can alter its moral responsibilities as well.

Just as the set of actors that might be held responsible for alleviating particular cases of global poverty can be altered, so can the boundaries of ‘global poverty’ itself. In the contemporary normative political theory and philosophy literature, global poverty is often conceived of in one of two ways. One way is as one big problem, called ‘global poverty,’ ‘world poverty’ or ‘severe poverty’. For example, Leif Wenar writes that his ‘ultimate aim will be to apply [his] hypothesis concerning the location of responsibility to *the case of severe poverty*’.⁵⁸ The other way is as an amalgam of many smaller problems.

⁵⁷ Simon Caney, ‘Global Poverty and Human Rights: The Case for Positive Duties’ in Thomas Pogge, ed., *Freedom from Poverty as a Human Right: Who Owes What to the Very Poor?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 275–302.

⁵⁸ Leif Wenar, ‘Responsibility and Severe Poverty’ in Thomas Pogge, ed., *Freedom from Poverty as a Human Right*, p. 258, my emphasis.

Each of these perspectives clarifies some aspects of global poverty and obscures others. A large-scale view is more helpful for analysing global structures and patterns of injustices; a small-scale view is more useful for understanding local political and social dynamics and the lived experiences of poor people. However, a third way of conceptualizing the issue of global poverty has the advantage of reducing the conflict between (1) acting on the basis of the strongest context-specific constellations of moral reasons and (2) maximally alleviating poverty, that both the large-scale and small-scale perspectives lack. Recall that Miller explains his connection theory using the case of malnourished Iraqi children. But he never explains or justifies the boundaries of this case: why Iraqi children but not Iraqi adults? Why all Iraqi children rather than only those in Baghdad? Despite their seeming arbitrariness, these boundaries play a crucial role in Miller's analysis because he argues that one or a few actors must be identified as responsible for *this* case. Yet if we conceptualize global poverty – and indeed, severe undeserved suffering more generally – in a more fluid manner, we might be able to address this case (and others) more effectively, by approaching them from two directions at once. On the one hand, we can find the best existing actors or create new actors for addressing these cases (as I suggested above). On the other hand, we can reconceptualize the case itself, so as to better fit existing (or potential) actors and their reasons for alleviating severe poverty and suffering. For example, if the issue of malnourished Iraqi children were divided up into smaller issues, there might emerge a wider range of actors that could be said to have some moral responsibility for ameliorating the situation, such as Iraqi civil society organizations.

In short, just as it is possible to develop new kinds of actors that can plausibly be said to have moral responsibility for alleviating particular cases of severe poverty, it is also possible to redraw boundaries so as to create 'new' cases of severe poverty that are more amenable to being successfully addressed by existing – or new – types of actors. One example of this is an effort by a consortium of international organizations to treat prophylaxis for several tropical diseases as one integrated issue, whereas previously it had been viewed as separate issues. As the *New York Times* reported, '[m]uch of the challenge [to implementing this integrated approach] stems from the fact that each drive against a disease – polio, measles, malaria – has its own leaders, charitable groups and donors at the international level'.⁵⁹ This argument also suggests that even the category of severe poverty itself ought to be up for reconceptualization, especially given that there are so many other related issues of profound moral importance, such as gross violations of civil and political rights, child trafficking and violence against women.⁶⁰

Approach #2: Creating Responsibility Conventionally

A second approach to creating responsibility for alleviating global poverty involves using conventional means, such as domestic legislation, international treaties or contracts between parties, to create legal responsibility that is morally justifiable. This second approach has the potential to alter responsibility more significantly than the previous approach and is also, in a sense, more transparent. However, it runs a higher risk of being unfair to, or dominating, those to whom responsibility is being assigned. (While I distinguish between the two

⁵⁹ Celia W. Duggan, 'A Joint Attack on Many Perils of Africa's Young,' *The New York Times*, 23 December 2006.

⁶⁰ My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for help on this point.

approaches for the sake of conceptual clarity, there are significant connections and overlaps between them.)

To understand what I mean by creating morally justifiable legal responsibility conventionally, consider the following example. In most states in the United States, rear drivers are responsible for avoiding traffic accidents with drivers ahead of them.⁶¹ If a driver bumps into the car ahead of him, the rear driver (or his insurance company) must usually pay damages. The justification for assigning responsibility in this way does not rest entirely on the rear driver's moral responsibility for paying for accidents. Insofar as it is easier for the rear driver to avoid accidents than the front driver, insofar as an individual is more responsible for avoiding harm if he or she can do so easily, and insofar as (in the case of car accidents) moral responsibility for causing an accident yields a moral responsibility to pay for it, rear drivers have a stronger moral responsibility to pay for accidents than do front drivers. But if we were trying to assign moral responsibility for paying for car accidents on a case-by-case basis, we would no doubt look at factors in addition to who was the rear driver and who was the front driver. For example, we might consider whether the front driver was not paying attention and slammed on the brakes. There would no doubt be some cases in which, all things considered, the front driver would be judged to be as morally responsible, or more morally responsible, for the cost of the accident than the rear driver.

Yet there are moral and practical reasons for assigning responsibility for car accidents to rear drivers, in general and in advance, even though this assignment of legal responsibility does not always track with moral responsibility. First, it helps to avoid bad outcomes, such as situations in which both front and rear drivers think that the other driver will get out of the way. It is also efficient, in that it avoids the need to identify who was most causally responsible for every accident. It can reduce unfair or arbitrary assignments of responsibility, and allow actors to plan ahead. Thus when responsibility for paying for accidents is assigned to rear drivers, the emphasis is more on achieving good outcomes in a morally justifiable way than it is on tracking individual drivers' precise, pre-existing moral responsibility for paying for car accidents.⁶²

Another example of conventionally created legal responsibilities are 'Bad Samaritan' legal statutes. Such statutes (which are law in a few US states, but rarely enforced) create a legal duty for bystanders to provide emergency aid when they can do so easily and if no one more qualified is available to help. These statutes differ from the rear driver example, in that many people think that there is already a moral responsibility to aid others in emergencies when one can do so at little cost to oneself; the statute merely legally codifies an already-existing moral responsibility. The similarity between the examples is that, like assigning responsibility for paying for accidents to rear drivers, Bad Samaritan statutes create legal responsibility conventionally. While these statutes are, according to their proponents, morally justifiable, their primary aim is to achieve good outcomes, not reflect individual moral responsibility.

⁶¹ My discussion here is indebted to Wenar, 'Responsibility and Severe Poverty'.

⁶² The driving example is dis-analogous to global poverty in two ways: all drivers are sometimes front drivers and sometimes rear drivers, so assigning the responsibility to rear drivers distributes the burden among all drivers. In contrast, everyone is not sometimes very poor. In addition, while one can avoid paying for a traffic accident by avoiding hitting drivers in front of oneself, because global poverty already exists, there is no way for everyone to avoid responsibility for it by being careful (except, perhaps, if one only recognizes direct causal responsibility as a moral reason to help alleviate poverty).

If we apply this mode of reasoning to the context of global poverty, we see that legal responsibility for alleviating poverty can be assigned to actors in ways that are morally justifiable, but do not simply reflect these actors' prior moral responsibility for alleviating global poverty. A possible objection to this approach is that it seems unfair to those on whom costs are imposed. But this is not necessarily the case, so long as several conditions are met. First, the purpose that the created responsibility is supposed to serve must be morally important; alleviating severe poverty would seem to qualify. Secondly, any poverty-alleviating burdens placed on actors must be the result of legitimate – usually democratic – procedures. Thirdly, these burdens must not be overly costly to any one actor in absolute terms, as this would be unfair to and/or disrespectful of that actor.⁶³ Fourthly, there must be attention to issues of equity among the actors sharing the burden (although there can be some tension between considerations of equity – which can involve distributing the burden of poverty alleviation widely among many different actors – and accountability, which can require assigning it narrowly to one or a few actors). Finally, if the distribution of legal or financial responsibility for alleviating poverty does not track with pre-existing moral responsibility, there must be compelling moral and/or practical reasons for this, just as there are compelling moral and practical reasons to assign responsibility for traffic accidents to rear drivers.

In sum, it might be possible to create legal responsibility for alleviating global poverty that is morally justifiable, but does not precisely track with our best estimation of actors' pre-existing moral responsibility for alleviating poverty. It seems that, to be justifiable, this kind of legal responsibility should not diverge too greatly from moral responsibility. (Determining how much divergence is too much is beyond the scope of this article.) But if we accept that some divergence between moral responsibility and legal responsibility is acceptable, then creating legal responsibility to alleviate global poverty is one way to both retain the idea that moral responsibility for alleviating poverty should be assigned based on the strongest context-specific constellation of reasons, while also maximizing (or coming closer to maximizing) poverty alleviation.

5. CONCLUSION: WHY ACTOR-CENTRED AND CASE-CENTRED QUESTIONS SHOULD NOT BE DEFERRED

Actor-centred and case-centred questions are almost certainly not the most important questions that one could ask about global poverty in general, or about moral responsibilities to help reduce global poverty in particular. More important, in all likelihood, are questions about the political causes of and potential solutions for global poverty, and about the net quantity of poverty alleviation that various kinds of actors have a responsibility to provide. It might therefore seem as if actor-centred and case-centred questions can (and should) only be addressed once these more important questions have been resolved. I do not think this is the case, however. To the contrary, asking actor-centred and case-centred questions can help us think more clearly about these other, more important questions.

Actor-centred questions help us think more clearly because they force us to confront exactly what is being given up, or who is being passed over, when a given actor is said to be responsible for alleviating a particular case of severe poverty (but not others). Asking the actor-centred question about a given actor before fully settling the question of what

⁶³ Caney makes this point in terms of respect rather than fairness (see Caney, 'Global Poverty and Human Rights').

net quantity of aid is required from that actor can lead to the conclusion that more poverty alleviation is required than had previously been thought. Judgements about the net quantity of poverty alleviation that particular actors are obliged to provide, and how to set priorities among poverty-alleviating activities can – and I think should – be reciprocal, with each informing the other. This idea is captured in an episode of the sitcom *Friends*, in which Phoebe’s brother, overwhelmed by caring for his young triplets, begs her to take one in. ‘Which one?’ she asks. In the process of describing the unique qualities of each, her brother concludes that he cannot give up any of them. In the same way, focusing on concrete trade-offs can shift people’s judgements about what net quantity of aid is morally required – and sometimes, even, about what is practically possible. When directly confronted with the reality of having to make particular trade-offs, actors sometimes magically find more resources or some other way to avoid having to make the trade-offs, just as Phoebe’s brother decided that he could care for all three triplets after all. We should guard vigilantly against making trade-offs prematurely, and thereby letting actors off the hook. But nor should we make judgements about the net quantity of poverty alleviation that is required from particular actors in the abstract, without thinking about the specific trade-offs or sacrifices that providing that quantity of aid would entail.

The same point holds with regard to case-centred questions. These questions appear to only arise once it has been determined that there is a need to identify one or a few actors as most responsible for alleviating a given case of severe poverty. However, asking which actor is most morally responsible for alleviating a particular case of severe poverty can lead to the conclusion that an institutional mechanism must be put in place to distribute responsibility among a larger number of actors, without allowing any to shirk their responsibilities. Again, our thinking about the two kinds of questions – whether it is necessary to specify a small group of actors as responsible and who would be specified if doing so were deemed necessary – ought to be reciprocal, with each informing the other.

Practical judgements about how – and whether – to set priorities among different poverty-alleviating activities that a given actor has a moral responsibility to undertake (actor-centred questions) and how – and whether – to assign responsibility for alleviating particular cases of severe poverty to specific actors (case-centred questions), are extremely difficult to make. No theoretical account can capture all of the complexity nuance – and importance for people’s lives – of real-world decisions about these issues. My objective has been to clarify some of these complexities and offer an account of how practical judgements about the responsibility to help alleviate global poverty might proceed in light of them.