

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Democratic altruism

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## Abstract

Transnational altruism comes in many forms, prominently among them private giving through charitable NGOs. This paper focuses on the altruistic actions of those giving to charitable organizations and especially on the subsequent altruistic choices of those second-order, donor-organizations. Leaving choices about how donated money should be used exclusively in the hands of donors is morally problematic in various ways. This is why transnational relationships that involve private giving from rich to poor should be democratized. We propose thus a new moral principle for guiding altruistic behavior: democratic altruism. We develop our argument by focusing on the moral powers and formative agency that donors exercise through their charitable behavior, in particular through their choice to support particular types of aid or organizations. We argue that if and when donors give, they should do so in a way that allows the poor to exercise formative agency as well, in decisions over how donated resources should be used on the ground.

**Keywords:** altruism; effective altruism; charity; justice; global poverty; affected interests

Transnational altruism comes in many forms. This paper focuses on the altruistic actions of those giving to charitable organizations (such as Oxfam and Save the Children), and especially on the subsequent altruistic choices of those second-order, donor-organizations.

Insofar as choices about how donated money should be used are left exclusively in the hands of such donors, problematic distributions of agency and unintended power relationships arise. The desirability of charitable donations cannot therefore simply be read off the apparent desirability of their altruistic motivations.<sup>1</sup> We argue for the need to *democratize* transnational relationships that involve voluntary giving from rich to poor, and in so doing rescue transnational altruism from its

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<sup>1</sup>Which may not themselves be altogether pure, of course. Some donate to receive tax breaks, which will then have to be subsidized by the other taxpayers (Carroll and Bach 2018; Cohen 2019).

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unsavory politics.<sup>2</sup> This paper thus proposes a new moral principle for orienting altruistic behavior: *democratic altruism*.

The same principle should of course apply at the domestic level as well; altruistic giving should be democratized there, too.<sup>3</sup> But within any given state, there are already institutions (in many states, democratic ones) by which that might be done. The problem is more acute at the transnational level, where political institutions are fewer, weaker, and less democratic. We shall therefore concentrate our attention in this paper on the more challenging task of democratizing altruism at the transnational level.

Our approach is similar to recent work on ‘effective altruism’ in one – if only one – respect.<sup>4</sup> Our concern, like theirs, is conditional in form. It is with the sort of ethics that should guide agents *if and when* they choose to give toward global poverty reduction. Effective altruists say, ‘If you’re going to give, you should give effectively.’<sup>5</sup> We say, ‘If you’re going to give, you should give democratically.’<sup>6</sup> As we shall show, there are some real tensions between those two injunctions. But our critique extends well beyond ‘effective altruism’ to all forms of charitable giving that leave donors exclusively responsible for deciding how resources dedicated toward global poverty alleviation should be used. We develop our argument by focusing on the *moral powers* that donors exercise through their charitable behavior, in particular through their choice to support particular types of aid or organizations.

## The problems of transnational altruism

When making a charitable donation, donors get to decide which aspects of an unjust world they choose to ameliorate with their own money, and which not. Besides choosing what cause to support, donors may even get to choose which types of policies or interventions they get to fund. Take the alleviation of global poverty – our focus here. Donors (big or small) can choose, not just among different organizations dedicated to helping the poor, but sometimes also the very means by which the poor will be helped.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup>We are hardly the first to notice the problematic nature of donors’ focus on program delivery to the exclusion of the root causes of poverty and the need for political mobilization against them, especially on the part of those suffering from it (Clough 2015; Rubenstein 2016, 517; Gabriel 2017). But here we go beyond such familiar critiques.

<sup>3</sup>For an in-depth discussion of philanthropy from a political-democratic perspective, focusing on state policy rather than the personal ethics of donors, see Reich (2018). See similarly Saunders-Hastings (2018) for a more general argument for why state institutions should regulate elite philanthropy, which focuses on the influence of elites on democratic decision-making.

<sup>4</sup>MacAskill 2015; Singer 2015. Following them, we shall refer to *GiveWell* (<https://www.givewell.org/>) as our recurring example of an instrument of ‘effective altruism’.

<sup>5</sup>Some ‘effective altruists’ such as Singer (2015) might also insist ‘and you must give!’ But we take it that the conditional version of ‘effective altruism’ is the more canonical. That version says that ‘there are many cases in which it would be wrong of you to give a sum of money to charities that do less good than other charities you could give instead, even if it would not be wrong of you not to give the money to charity’ (Pummer 2016, 95).

<sup>6</sup>As we clarify below, the phrase ‘if you’re going to give’ should be read as ‘if you’re going to give *on any given occasion*’. We assume that we are all under a duty to give sometime during our lifetimes.

<sup>7</sup>For simplicity, we here assume, for the sake of argument, that the background distribution of resources is just. If (as is almost certainly the case) it is not, our conclusions follow all the more forcefully.

That is something we should consider more carefully in light of the ever-increasing amount of private resources oriented toward global poverty alleviation.<sup>8</sup> Their magnitude is large enough to be key to alleviating the problems of an unjust world (or, if it goes badly, exacerbating those problems). Consider the activities of the Gates Foundation, which distributes around \$4 billion annually in the areas of health and agriculture, making it a bigger player than any government in these key areas of aid. To be sure, wealthy individuals and collective donors may be well-intended. But this doesn't prevent their behavior from having unintended, morally problematic structural effects. In depending crucially on the discretionary choices of the rich, the poor find their freedom seriously undermined – at least on a republican interpretation of freedom as non-domination.<sup>9</sup> Domination here can be exercised even by the well-meaning.

In this paper we focus on a particular *type* of domination. It comes in the form of *moral powers* that donors exercise through their charitable choices. These moral powers can be conceptualized as the exercise of *formative agency*: the capacity to determine what morality calls for in a particular context. On our account those who dominate exercise their moral powers in ways that render ineffectual the moral powers of those who are dominated.<sup>10</sup>

### Formative agency in transnational altruism

Onora O'Neill famously observed that any theory of justice (or charity come to that) is incomplete without specifying the agents upon whom the duty to promote justice (or charity) rests.<sup>11</sup> But identifying those agents is not enough. An additional step is needed, which is determining what their duty of justice or charity practically calls for in any given context – how that duty should be discharged on the ground by those agents. Duty-bearers' moral agency extends to those choices.

#### **What does it mean to be a formative agent**

To be a formative agent means to be able practically to influence the scope and content of what is morally required in any given context.<sup>12</sup> Individuals and organizations exercise formative agency through their behavior and interactions. The practical meanings of morality, justice, or charity in the real world are socially constructed and encoded in social norms.<sup>13</sup> Abstract principles of morality (whether charity, justice, respect, or desert) are not directly action-guiding. They must be further precisified in applying those principles to concrete situations. Actors must thus 'fill in' those missing details when deciding how to discharge their duties of charity

<sup>8</sup>While we discuss *private* giving and public giving is not our focus here, the same principles mentioned here could extend to public giving (e.g. foreign aid) as well.

<sup>9</sup>Pettit 1997.

<sup>10</sup>Our discussion of moral powers is thus different from Rawls's (2001). Whereas he focuses on the moral powers as capacities that people possess, our discussion of formative agency focuses on how they are exercised and with what effect.

<sup>11</sup>O'Neill 2001.

<sup>12</sup>See Dryzek 2015 for a discussion of formative agency in matters of justice.

<sup>13</sup>Defined as regularities of behavior that have a prescriptive force (Brennan et al. 2013).

or justice toward others. Individual and collective actors operationalize abstract principles of morality on an everyday basis. Their social and political practices have the same function of specifying and making relevant for any given context underspecified moral principles.<sup>14</sup>

Take, for example, the case of effective altruists. For them, the relevant moral principle is a clear and uncompromising welfare consequentialism: all that matters is promoting aggregate welfare in the most effective way. In emphasizing the maximization of welfare, however, effective altruists neglect other moral considerations such as equality, fairness, or the special moral status of the most vulnerable, all of which would lead us to support different types of interventions that might fail to maximize welfare. And even if everyone (including the poor) were to accept the maximization of welfare as *the* supreme moral principle, the application of the principle itself could be morally disputed. Determining what ‘welfare’ is and how it should be measured are morally loaded questions as well. All those choices require the exercise of formative agency.

Furthermore, welfare consequentialism on its own does not determine what benefit metric we should use. That requires further specification as well. Should this metric be lives saved, or should lives be adjusted by age, or by quality of the life that is saved (beyond bare survival)? Of the multiple methods available for calculating each of these versions of lives saved, which method should be chosen? Should we attempt to convert all benefits (as well as costs) to a monetary metric?<sup>15</sup> Should we consider only those types of interventions that directly contribute to alleviating poverty and that do so rapidly, or should we consider also those interventions that would indirectly contribute to poverty alleviation in the long run (perhaps therefore benefitting more people in the future but fewer people in the present)? Despite being informed by data, the effective altruist’s decisions are still inevitably made under uncertainty. There is thus a risk that any given program might fail to produce the expected result or may have perverse effects. And of course there are opportunity costs in every decision to choose one program over another. Those translate into some people losing out in the process, even if the chosen program is successful.<sup>16</sup> The changes that would most increase material welfare are institutional or systemic – trade reform, for example, would make a sustainable contribution to millions of people’s lives. But the chance of producing such reforms is, as we speak, low.<sup>17</sup> Effective altruists have to decide whether to fund low-risk interventions bearing a lower (but immediate) return or high-risk ones that would have a significantly greater return if successful in the long term.

To be sure, such questions arise for anyone thinking methodically about distributions of benefits and burdens, not merely effective altruists. We just want to

<sup>14</sup>Take the processes that yielded the world’s two greatest global poverty alleviation agendas: the Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals. They were highly political processes in which different actors brought different conceptions of justice to bear on the agenda, with the eventual content of the goals being sensitive to not just the persuasiveness of different arguments, but also to rhetorical appeals, negotiating ploys, and the exercise of political power.

<sup>15</sup>As practiced, for example, in the work of the Copenhagen Consensus Centre, which is applauded on at least one effective altruist website <https://whatiseffectivealtruism.com/#donations>.

<sup>16</sup>And, of course, into even more people losing out if the chosen program turns out to be unsuccessful.

<sup>17</sup>Gabriel 2017, 468.

emphasize that since abstract principles of altruism cannot determine exactly what they ought to do in specific contexts, transnational altruists must themselves fill in those missing details when deciding how to discharge their duties of charity in any given setting. Insofar as organizations such as *GiveWell* help to fill in those missing details for donors, those organizations act as formative agents as well, to the degree that they are successful in informing donors' decisions. In a bid to influence individual donors, *GiveWell* assesses and compares charities and aid programs according to how effectively they use donations. The organization judges what welfare-consequentialist altruism calls for *in practice*, supporting certain charities or aid programs over others. Of course, individual donors may themselves pass similar judgments when deciding, each on their own, what their preferred moral principles require of them when discharging their duties of charity – what causes and organizations to support, and how much to donate. All of those are exercises of formative agency.

### **The formative agency of individual donors and charities**

Wealthy donors act as formative agents in several ways. First, since the resources any given individual can devote to altruistic actions are limited in comparison with the many potentially worthy causes in need of these resources, donors get to define the content and scope of their duties when deciding what *causes* (e.g. global poverty; animal welfare; the environment; scientific research; and so on) to support and *how much* to donate. Second, after settling on a particular cause – say global poverty, our concern here – altruists can choose an organization (Oxfam, Save the Children, and so on) and sometimes even a specific program/type of aid (mosquito nets, vaccines, sanitation, schools, hospitals, food, and infrastructure) they wish to support.

In directing their resources toward particular programs, initiatives, or organizations, donors deem as more important certain types of disadvantage and suffering associated with global poverty. But they are also implicitly judging the relative worth of different moral claims belonging to different people in need when doing so. When deciding whether poverty is better tackled by supporting fair trade initiatives, investment in education or one-off cash transfers to the poor themselves, donors determine the practical content of their duties. They can in effect specify what abstract duties of charity<sup>18</sup> call for on the ground, exercising formative agency over a set of various decisions (to what cause and organization to give, how much, and what type of aid one's money will provide).

The charities and organizations allowing altruists to collectivize their modest efforts act as formative agents to an even greater extent. Their *raison d'être* is precisely to identify worthy causes and categories of need, and to advance those they consider most worthy. By collecting small individual donations, such organizations gain control over vast resources that – through the projects they select or recommend for funding – will have a great impact on the life prospects of the poor: both those who will benefit from the projects that are funded and those who will not. Donor organizations can thus exercise a great amount of formative agency

<sup>18</sup>Here we take that we all have *at least* a duty of charity to help the poor. We elaborate on this below.

themselves. But their discretionary power leaves little room for the poor's own formative agency.

*Effective altruism* accentuates rather than solves this problem. In requiring donors to judge the effectiveness of contributing to any given organization, effective altruism implicitly makes donors exercise yet *more* formative agency. The poor however are not called upon to determine the 'effectiveness' of such altruism despite the fact that: (a) the poor are the effective altruist's primary object of concern; (b) they are directly affected by such altruistic choices; (c) they may have situated knowledge useful when judging the effectiveness of various charitable courses of action; and (d) the 'effectiveness' of altruism may in fact depend on the poor's active participation in the solutions supported by charitable donations.<sup>19</sup>

For effective altruists, these decisions are a matter for calculation on the part of donors and those who advise them. For example, *GiveWell* calculates that four months of seasonal malaria chemoprevention through anti-malaria drugs for children can be achieved for a donation of US\$6.93,<sup>20</sup> leading to a cost per life saved of approximately \$3461 (2016 estimate), enabling potential donors to determine whether this is a good use of their money in comparison with other potential uses. Consultation with potential beneficiaries and casualties of any given program that might be chosen is not required.<sup>21</sup>

The asymmetries in formative agency supported by transnational altruism have important consequences.<sup>22</sup> Introducing large quantities of outside resources into a community can affect local power structures, advantaging those with a role in distributing the money locally, disadvantaging those with no such connection. It can also make communities overdependent on donor agencies and NGOs delivering certain services, thereby further hampering those communities' autonomy as a side effect. In making up for a government's deficiencies through their activities, charities can disincentivize people from participating within the political system, or from protesting against (and possibly overturning) bad governments. Furthermore, companies supplying (e.g.) vaccines or genetically modified seeds to programs administered by the Gates Foundation may develop a stake in the continuation of those programs – and so have a perverse incentive to work to ensure their services will continue to be needed.

In light of these effects flowing from donors' exclusive and extensive exercise of formative agency, we propose the principle of *democratic altruism*. We examine below the moral and epistemic reasons why the global poor should exercise more formative agency in determining what altruism requires in any given context, not so much in terms of *how much* should be given, more in terms of *what should*

<sup>19</sup>Gabriel 2017, 465. When judging how effective any given project or program would be, we often rush to assume that the poor communities will make use of it. But, of course, they may not. If they do not, the investment will be a total waste. Investments that we deem to 'benefit' or 'be in the interest' of the poor are no exception of course. There is no point investing in programs the poor will not participate in because they do not see any value in them.

<sup>20</sup><https://www.givewell.org/charities/malaria-consortium#Whatdoyougetforyourdollar>, accessed 9 December 2018.

<sup>21</sup>And presumably if it was sought (or would be in the future), it should simply be treated as an input into those effectiveness calculations.

<sup>22</sup>Clough 2015.

*be done* with the money that is given. This democratization is for the sake of procedural justice, not the intrinsic value of democracy. We explain below how justice and charity – two different moral domains – can co-exist in our account of democratic altruism.

We start our discussion from the assumption that giving to the poor is at least a duty of charity, if not of justice.<sup>23</sup> Duties of charity are imperfect duties that leave the duty-bearers with some latitude as to *when* and *how* these duties will be discharged. Not being directed toward any given individual, they do not correlate with any individual rights against the duty-bearer.<sup>24</sup> Still, to say that these duties are imperfect is different from saying that they are less morally binding.<sup>25</sup> We all have universal, albeit non-directed, duties of charity toward the poor meaning we should all help the poor at some point in our lives. The imperfect nature of our duty of charity simply allows us to choose *when* to discharge this duty, not whether we *ever* discharge it.

Readers should thus not read too much into our starting assumption. We do not wish to take a firm position on whether the duties to help the poor are merely duties of charity, or whether they may be duties of justice as well. That is simply not the main focus of our argument here. Instead, we fix our focus firmly on the argument for letting the poor have a say in what form help (whether given out of charity or justice) will take on the ground. That argument applies regardless of how the duty to give is grounded, whether in charity or in justice, as we show in the section ‘Duties of respect’. We object to transnational altruism on the basis of the inequality of formative agency it involves – and this inequality exists regardless of whether the duty to help the poor is conceived as one of justice or as one of charity.

### The moral grounds of democratic altruism

As it stands, transnational altruists are effective formative agents, roughly in proportion to the amount of their giving. The poor should enjoy the same status as formative agents. The ethical principle of democratic altruism we defend respects the formative agency of both the rich and the poor. We argue that a second-order, *conditional duty of procedural justice*<sup>26</sup> to let the poor decide how donations will be used on the ground emerges *if and when* others act upon their duties (whether of charity or of justice) to help the poor. This second-order, conditional duty of procedural justice is grounded in the poor’s life *interests* which are gravely affected by such decisions, and in the *recognition* we owe them as equal autonomous human beings.

<sup>23</sup>Barry 1982; Narveson 1988; Valentini 2013. Below we remind readers why duties to help the poor are standardly conceived as imperfect duties of charity.

<sup>24</sup>O’Neill 1986.

<sup>25</sup>Indeed, imperfect duties of charity can be even more important than perfect duties of justice. For a discussion along these lines, see Goodin 2017.

<sup>26</sup>‘Procedural’ because it bears on the procedure that we should follow when discharging our first-order duties to help the poor. This conditional duty is *not* one of distributive justice. Distributive justice may determine the content of our first-order duties we have toward the poor – mainly, whether we should aim for an egalitarian, prioritarian, or sufficientarian distribution. Here we take no position on this latter question.



**Duties of justice: affected interests give rise to moral claims to a say**

Suppose our duties toward the global poor are duties of charity (or beneficence), and not of justice. Even so, we argue that, *if and when* these first-order duties of beneficence are being acted upon, separate second-order duties of procedural justice arise. Even if there is no first-order duty of justice to give to the poor, and you are not wronging anyone by not giving now (or indeed by choosing to direct your charitable donations toward some other cause), once you do decide to help the global poor, it would be wrong to direct your resources with literally no regard to what causes, organizations, or programs the poor themselves find important. This is our ‘democratic altruism’ principle.

The principle imposes a *conditional duty of procedural justice* on people whenever they donate toward global poverty reduction.<sup>27</sup> Democratic altruism lets the poor have a say, *not* in whether you donate at all or how much, but in *how* your donation is used if you decide to give. So even if the rich have only a duty of beneficence to help the poor, such that the global poor have no *right* against the rich to be helped, once the rich decide to help they acquire an additional duty of justice toward the poor to let the poor act as formative agents of justice deciding where the resources should go.<sup>28</sup> Thus both donors and beneficiaries of altruism, both rich and poor, can act as formative agents of justice. But the formative agency of each is limited by that of the other.<sup>29</sup>

Why think of this conditional duty as a duty of *justice*? For the same reason the granting of the franchise was. It was a matter of justice to give the vote to blacks, women, propertyless workers and, more generally, all those whose life interests are gravely affected by our laws and policies. It was *unjust* to deny them the franchise. Having one’s welfare and interests gravely affected by the collective decisions we make surely gives rise to a *right* to have a say in those decisions.<sup>30</sup> The beneficiaries of our altruism are likewise greatly affected by our altruistic decisions. In directing our resources toward one organization or program, or according to one ethical principle (e.g. effective altruism) rather than another, we are greatly affecting the interests and welfare of other people (the global poor) in an asymmetrical way.

<sup>27</sup>Our principle is, as we have said, similar to ‘effective altruism’ in that respect (Pummer 2016) – although what follows for us from this condition (‘if you give’) being met is different, viz., that if you give at all, you must give in a way that respects the agency of the poor themselves. What grounds our conditional duty of justice is also different: effective altruists argue that ‘avoiding gratuitous worseness’ is what gives rise to a conditional duty to be an effective altruist; whereas we argue that greatly affecting the poor’s life interests and welfare gives rise to a conditional duty to let them have a say in how donations are used.

<sup>28</sup>Consider the analogy to administrative law. Even if a state agency is under no legal obligation to provide a certain service to citizens, if the agency chooses to provide such a service then it is under a duty of justice to provide it in accordance to the rules of due process (established by the Administrative Procedure Act in the USA, for example).

<sup>29</sup>What if our first-order duty to give to the poor is in fact a duty of justice? Notice that the same second-order duty of procedural justice to let the poor have a say in how the donation will be spent would exist even if the first-order duty to help the poor was one of justice rather than of charity. The only difference this would make to our argument is that our second-order duty of procedural justice would not be ‘conditional’ anymore. But it is the existence of the duty to let the poor have a say in how the money is spent, not the conditional form of that duty, that is the central point of our article.

<sup>30</sup>See Dahl 1956, 1982; Whelan 1983; Goodin 2007.



Our donation choices can affect the poor's interests in a positive or negative way. Our contributions will be directed toward some organizations rather than others, thereby benefitting some of the poor and leaving others in the same state of destitution. Indeed, through such choices donors are exercising a fair amount of formative agency because each time they make such decisions they are effectively serving as moral arbiters deciding the relative worth of the poor's moral claims to assistance, trying to reconcile the poor's competing claims, or prioritizing some claims over others. But transnational altruism is inevitably *partial* altruism. Since this partial altruism may alleviate some people's suffering while ignoring others' suffering – on cost-effectiveness or other grounds – transnational altruists owe something, if only an explanation or expression of regret, to the poor who have been neglected by their contributions.

Those potentially benefitting from transnational donations should *also* have a say in how donations are distributed, ideally in proportion<sup>31</sup> to the impact those donations could make on their welfare (which in turn will reflect their size).<sup>32</sup> Setting aside the Bill Gates of the world, no ordinary individual's donation will have a huge impact over recipients' (and non-recipients') interests and welfare. In practice, it would cost too much to organize this input from the poor into a small individual decision. But all individual donations, *collectively*, will make a big difference. And as the impact of the decision becomes greater (e.g. when allocating funds from large NGOs or charities), these transaction costs become much smaller in comparison with what is at stake. Each year organizations such as Oxfam and Save the Children raise millions of dollars. With the exception of very wealthy individual donors eager to gain naming rights, it's usually the organizations themselves, rather than smaller individual donors, who decide in practice how the raised money will be spent. Such large amounts of money can and do make a huge difference to the global poor. Wealthy donor organizations currently get to dictate how money will be spent on the ground, thereby deeply affecting others' life prospects. Those who potentially stand to lose or gain most from these choices – the poor – therefore have a strong claim, on the grounds of their affected interests, to exercise formative agency in relation to these organizations' decisions. The poor's claim to decide how donations will be used on the ground is hence primarily directed at charities and organizations pooling individual donations and at very large individual donors.

The principle of democratic altruism therefore calls on the poor to act as formative agents of justice with regard to a particular set of choices. There are various ways in which the poor can have a say in how donations are used. First and foremost, they should be able to influence how these big organizations pooling

<sup>31</sup>See Brighouse and Fleurbaey (2010) for a defence of a proportional application of the affected interests principle.

<sup>32</sup>This is not to say that donors cannot express views on these matters. As we highlight in the fourth section when talking about implementation, donors and recipients should be able to engage discursively with one another and persuade one another of the advantages/disadvantages of using donations in a certain way. But the final choice in these decisions should belong to the poor, in virtue of the magnitude of their affected interests. Simply consulting the poor or enabling them to express their views is not enough. For this reason, we should prefer those implementation mechanisms that would best enable the poor to have a decisive influence on these matters.

individual donations will divide the resources they raise, and what particular programs will be funded (e.g. whether money will be spent on mosquito nets, food, infrastructure projects, schools, and hospitals, or direct cash transfers to the most needy). But the poor should also be able to draw their own preference lists, ranking organizations and charities such that private donors can orient their resources toward the organizations and programs the poor themselves endorse.

Imagine, for example, a meta-charity – let us call it ‘*Give Democratically*’ – that, instead of using the principle of ‘effective altruism’ in rating organizations and guiding donors’ choices, rates organizations (and their programs) on the basis of the poor’s own assessments of those organizations (a bit like in a consumers’ satisfaction survey), or on the basis of our principle of democratic altruism, rating each organization in accordance to how democratic its program delivery is. That way, individual donors would be able to know what organizations and programs for poverty alleviation the global poor themselves prefer or which organizations are the most responsive to the poor’s voices.

To be sure, the poor’s interests are diverse, and different poor have different priorities. But this lack of uniformity is no excuse for donors unilaterally deciding the poor’s fate. Instead it would be better to let the poor themselves – as affected parties – reconcile their various moral claims to assistance. The poor’s conflicting interests and claims to assistance can be reconciled in a more morally defensible way if all those who stand to win or lose from such decisions can exercise influence over these decisions roughly proportionally to how affected their interests are. In the fourth section, we point out that the deliberative engagement among the poor, and the creation of deliberative fora the poor can access, can best serve this purpose. Democratic deliberation would allow all affected parties to make the case for why their interests or preferences should be prioritized over others.’<sup>33</sup>

Having a way to influence how (if not when) imperfect duties of charity will be discharged would allow the global poor as well as the global rich to exercise formative agency. We argued that, even if there is no duty of justice to help them, once the rich decide to give to the poor they have a conditional duty of justice to donate their resources toward those organizations, types of aid, or programs the poor themselves support, such that the poor can have a say in how their charitable donations will be used on the ground. Those who stand to win or lose from decisions to allocate resources to a particular type of aid or program should have this say based on their life chances and interests being gravely affected by such choices.

But why should this duty be *conditional*, leaving to the donor the decision of whether or not to donate anything at all? If having one’s life prospects and interests affected by others’ charitable decisions is what gives the poor a say in how those donations will be used, why doesn’t it also give them a say in whether others donate at all, how much, to global poverty rather than other causes? After all, the global poor’s life prospects and interests are affected by people’s not donating just as

<sup>33</sup>As a result of this process, of course, some interests or preferences may fail to be prioritized. This is not morally problematic in any way, provided all interests and preferences have been subjected to deliberative-democratic scrutiny, and all affected parties managed to influence the deliberative process roughly in proportion to their stakes. However, we have reasons to respect the decisions of such fora of the poor only insofar as they abide by deliberative-democratic standards. Fora, for example, where women are excluded or discouraged from openly speaking their minds would not have a claim to such respect.

much as by their donating, by their donating little just as much as by their donating lots, by their directing their charitable donations toward other causes as much as by donating to alleviating global poverty. If having one's life interests affected gives rise to a moral claim to a say within the scope of the conditional duty, why doesn't its moral power extend to the conditional as well? Why doesn't it make the decision of donating or not itself a matter of justice?<sup>34</sup> As we indicated in the second section, our argument that the poor should have a say in how donations will be used stands regardless of whether we conceive our duties to help them to be duties of charity or of justice. Still, we should justify why we think that their formative agency should not extend to donors' decision about whether to give on any given occasion and how much.

Our reply would be that, while there are *pro tanto* reasons why the poor should have a say in those decisions as well (because of their affected interests), it is not so clear whether they should do so all-things-considered. There are strong countervailing moral considerations to be taken into account concerning the question of *if* and *when* and *how* much the rich should give that do not apply (or do not apply nearly as strongly) to the question of how donations will be used. People have 'agent-centered prerogatives' to enable them to form and pursue life plans of their own.<sup>35</sup> And 'how much is taken from them' impacts the life-plans of the rich to a far greater extent than 'how it is used' once relinquished.

In terms of our framework, that is to say the poor's formative agency should not grievously undermine the rights the rich themselves have against the rest of the world.<sup>36</sup> Giving the poor a say in whether, how much, and when the rich give to them threatens to do just that. Indeed, it would limit the rich's own capacity to act as formative agents. Imposing a conditional duty has no such effect. Under a conditional duty, the rich still have a complete say over when and how much of their resources they are going to devote to the eradication of global poverty. All a conditional duty does is to say that their decision to donate to any given program or organization fighting global poverty should be constrained by the poor's own choice in these matters. This is a much more modest demand, and one that pays due regard to the competing interests that both rich and poor have at stake in the situation.<sup>37</sup>

But if the wealthy should be free to decide whether to give or not and how much, why don't they also have a moral right to decide how their resources will be used once given? After all, they might well have their own preferences on those matters. While that may be so, surely one's preference in some matter does not automatically give one a *right* to decide in that matter, especially considering the difference in stakes donors and potential recipients have in the decision of how donations will be

<sup>34</sup>Notice that a similar objection might be raised against effective altruism as well: if 'avoiding worseness' justifies the duty to donate effectively (Pummer 2016) then why doesn't it also justify a duty to donate *tout court*, since *not* donating causes worseness as well?

<sup>35</sup>Scheffler 1982. These prerogatives include a right to use one's own resources: 'To act out of charity is to help others in need – at reasonable cost – using *one's own resources*, namely the resources that one has a *right* to' (Valentini 2013, 492, added emphasis).

<sup>36</sup>Owens 2019.

<sup>37</sup>Notice that similar sorts of reasons sometimes warrant courts granting the beneficiaries of bequests 'deeds of variation' that override the wishes of the dead donor with respect to how the money will be used.

used.<sup>38</sup> The wealthy would exercise undue power over the poor in insisting that their donations be used in a certain way as a way to help them.<sup>39</sup>

Even if it is completely within the power of the rich to decide when to give to the poor and how much, this discretion is meant to protect their resources and capacity to make life plans – and once the rich themselves have decided to part with their resources, their power to impose conditions over the use of those resources can no longer be justified on those moral grounds. Imposing such conditions would affect *other* people's life plans rather than their own. The greater power 'to withhold the money altogether' does *not* subsume the smaller power 'to withhold the money unless it is used in a certain way'.<sup>40</sup> That is especially true here, since letting those others have a say in how the money will be used does not come at any extra cost to the donor. Hence even if the rich always yield power over the poor in having a discretionary choice in whether to give or not on any given occasion, once they decide to give, they should not make any further, gratuitous choices that affect the poor's life prospects but not their own.<sup>41</sup> In other words, while some types of domination may be unavoidable or justified all-things-considered, others are not.<sup>42</sup> Gratuitous frustrations of agency should be avoided, and this is precisely what our principle aims to do.

<sup>38</sup>Indeed, not all preferences are morally on a par: we deem someone's claim for aid to satisfy her hunger as more important than someone's claim for aid to build a monument, although both individuals might subjectively attach the same importance to these preferences (Scanlon 1975, 599–60). While in the case of the former, preferences relate to 'basic human needs', for the latter they relate to what we would deem merely as 'personal desires'. For a discussion of needs and desires, see Frankfurt 1984. Donors may of course have desires regarding how their donations be used on the ground. Poor people's needs (as expressed by those poor) should however take priority over donors' desires or donors' own judgments about what the poor need.

<sup>39</sup>To be sure, many individuals who donate modest sums of money hardly exercise formative agency over how their money will be used on the ground, that decision being made instead by the organizations collecting their donations. Hence, they would not be deprived of that particular choice since they currently don't enjoy it anyway. But very large donors can impose their will in those matters as well (e.g. when donating on condition that their money be used in a particular way). And of course, charitable organizations pooling individual donations exercise formative agency over these choices when supporting certain types of aid or programs. The latter two should thus limit their formative agency when it comes to this set of decisions.

<sup>40</sup>Contrary to what some classic texts in political philosophy may claim, more recent jurisprudence reveals a raft of cases in which it should not be thought that 'the greater power subsumes the lesser power' (Goodin 2004).

<sup>41</sup>What about those who insist that they will donate only on condition that their money be used for a certain purpose which the poor might disapprove of? First, we can doubt that their motivation is indeed to help the poor at all, instead of merely satisfying their own preferences or vanity. Second, accepting such offers could violate the moral requirement of letting the poor exercise formative agency. The question is how close or how far the donor's insisted purpose is from the poor's own preference regarding how such a donation should be used. If the poor *really* do not approve of the way the donor wants the donation to be used, and they are not willing to make use of the investment on those terms, then nothing would truly be lost by declining the donor's offer. In that case, taking into account the poor's wishes would allow us to avoid a wasteful investment whose only purpose would be to satisfy donor's vanity. But if, while the donor's preferred purpose is not the poor's first priority, it is their second or third, then we may be morally justified in accepting the donor's condition. Notice however that knowing poor's own priorities would nonetheless require us to consult the poor in the first place.

<sup>42</sup>Indeed, just because our interests are affected by others' actions does not, all-things-considered, give us a decisive say in those actions. We must take into account the interests that are at stake for both parties.

### Duties of respect

There is a second reason for democratizing transnational altruism, which works in parallel to the first discussed above. It concerns the *duties of respect* owed toward those we assist. That is the second moral ground of our second-order, conditional duty to let the poor have a say in how donations will be used: *justice as recognition*.<sup>43</sup>

We respect others not only by doing nothing that would undermine their autonomy (e.g. coerce or deceive them). We also respect others by protecting them from threats to their autonomy and actively promoting their autonomy – allowing them to make their own decisions and be responsible for them, and generally increasing their control over their lives.<sup>44</sup> The gratuitous frustration of others' preferences is thus a mark of disrespect for their capacity to make autonomous choices in matters that concern them<sup>45</sup>: especially when respecting their preferences would not impose any additional costs on us.

We certainly owe an apology or an explanation to those we have wronged. Perhaps we owe even more when prioritizing our own preferences over theirs will have a grave impact on their life interests and welfare. For example, say that I can only save someone else's life by either sacrificing one of her arms or one of her legs. Surely in such a case, while I have a duty to save that person's life, *ceteris paribus*, I should take into account the person's preferences between being an arm or a leg amputee for the rest of her life. Indeed, perhaps I should even ask that person whether she prefers being saved *at all*, considering that saving her life would leave her seriously incapacitated for life in one way or another. Thus there are limits to the freedom a duty-bearer has in discharging her duty, especially when the discharge of that duty may entail serious harm or risk to those to whom it is owed (as in the example above) or when it may have serious consequences for them (as in the case of the global poor).

To respect others is thus to relate to people 'not as instruments or obstacles but as persons who are to be reasoned with'.<sup>46</sup> We may say that in treating the poor as targets or numbers in their calculations, effective altruists fail to engage respectfully with the beneficiaries of their donations as persons they should reason with. The same is true of donor organizations that provide assistance to the poor without taking due account of the views of the poor themselves.

Our duties to help others and our duties to respect them are distinct sets of duties. In discharging our duties to help others, we can nonetheless be disrespectful of their autonomy. Those who accept from the start that our first-order duties to help the poor are duties of justice may nonetheless deny that we do any wrong in not respecting the recipients' wishes. After all, they may say, those duties of

<sup>43</sup>Authors such as Taylor (1992), Honneth (1996), Fraser and Honneth (2003), and Forst (2011) all conceive justice, in one way or another, as a matter of recognition and respect.

<sup>44</sup>Dillon 2018.

<sup>45</sup>Note that living one's life according to one's preferences is a measure of one's autonomy. However, not all preferences are essential to one's capacity to lead an autonomous life. Other-regarding or 'nosy preferences' (see Barry 1986) or what Dworkin (1977) calls 'external preferences' – regarding other people's lives – have a different status and do not demand the same respect. Furthermore, as remarked in footnote 41, not all of one's preferences are equally important to one or one's autonomy.

<sup>46</sup>Dillon 2018.

justice do not require respecting their wishes; they merely require helping them and there are many ways to do that. True – but even if disrespecting their wishes may not violate the duty of justice to help, it can still be wrong on other grounds, mainly on the ground of violating a duty to respect their autonomy.

Importantly our first-order duties of justice to help others do not supersede our second-order duties to respect their autonomy in the process. They don't offer an excuse for not discharging these second-order duties, particularly when respecting others comes at no additional cost to us over and above that already imposed by our first-order duties to help them. If I have a duty to help you and there are several alternative ways of doing so, I can discharge my duty by following any one of these options. I am not bound by my duty to pursue one option over any other. Now, say you state your preference for one option in particular: *x*. If pursuing *x* comes at no higher cost to me than the other options, and I still decide to help you by choosing some option other than your preferred *x*, we may think that I am wronging you somehow. But I do so *not* because I am violating my duty of justice to help you – after all, you do not have a right against me to be helped via a certain option. My decision involves a separate, distinct moral wrong: it is a violation of a separate duty of respect for people as free and equal agents capable of self-governing.<sup>47</sup>

What about a situation where discharging our duties of respect *does* come at some extra cost for the duty-bearer? And what if, furthermore, respecting poor people's wishes in this respect would undermine the promotion of their welfare?<sup>48</sup> Where there are extra costs, and depending on their magnitude, we may be justified in frustrating the poor's choices in these matters. If satisfying their choices would impose a great burden on us, certainly if the burden on us is greater than the one the poor would incur in not being able to make their own choices, that might make the frustration of their choices less objectionable. The second factor that matters is, of course, whether bearing this extra cost would undermine the promotion of the poor's welfare or not. If we are reasonably sure that it will,<sup>49</sup> then it's less clear that we should bear this extra cost in order to respect their choices. Notice however that it is the combination of the 'extra cost' and the 'certainty of a bad outcome if we respect their choices' that makes not respecting their choices acceptable, all-things-considered. Below, we argue that in the absence of extra costs, and under conditions of greater uncertainty, we should be more reluctant not to respect the poor's choices.

Earlier we argued that having crucial interests in the way donations are used gives the global poor a moral claim to have a say in how those donations will be used. We have now argued that, at least when respecting the global poor's choices does not come at an extra cost for other agents, these latter agents should use the donations as the global poor see fit. Respecting other people's autonomy – including when discharging our own duties toward them – provides thus a second

<sup>47</sup>See Kant [1785] 1996, [1788] 1996, [1797] 1996.

<sup>48</sup>We discuss the latter question of potential tradeoffs in the section 'Pragmatic advantages', but there we assume no extra cost for the duty-bearer. Here we consider them together.

<sup>49</sup>Of course, in a real situation we might not be sure, more of which in the section Pragmatic advantages.

argument for why the global poor's voices should be heard by international charities and big donors.

### **Moral patienthood and relational equality**

We now turn to examine and shed some new light on a common objection to global aid.

Theorists of global justice often complain about the global poor being treated as 'moral patients' or as mere 'recipients of justice'.<sup>50</sup> Such complaints are part of a broader call to defend the agency of the poor and to empower them.<sup>51</sup>

In one way, that may be just to restate the previous complaint: any paternalistic interventions on your behalf, without giving you a say about it, disrespects your autonomy. But what *else* is wrong with moral patienthood, beyond that? When exactly and why is the status of moral patienthood problematic? To answer this question, we must examine this objection more closely and think in *what sense* can we complain about the poor being moral patients.

We might object to this status on the ground that being a moral patient entails being an object of another's moral duty, *without* however having any rights against the duty-bearer. If the moral responsibilities of wealthy donors toward the poor are conceived as imperfect duties of charity, not as duties of justice, then the poor do not have any rights against the rich. It's in this sense that the poor are 'moral patients'. And not discharging these duties of charity does not constitute *wronging* any particular poor person. But while that may not constitute wronging anyone in particular, not discharging one's duties of charity is nonetheless morally wrong. Not discharging a moral duty is morally objectionable, irrespective of whether or not that duty is directed at any particular person. It's hard to see then why the status of moral patient would be morally problematic – even if it does not give the poor any claim rights, it does not provide an excuse for the rich not doing their duty to help the poor.

Even if duties of charity are imperfect duties that don't correlate with any given individual's rights, logically, they might nonetheless correlate with collective rights of the global poor as a whole. So while any individual poor person would not have any individual rights against any particular rich donor and charity (and hence, in the absence of these rights, might be labeled a 'moral patient'), the global poor as a whole may collectively have rights against rich donors and charities as a whole. These rights would of course have to be claimed by the group or on behalf of the group, which is why the collective empowerment and collective agency of the poor is so important. But again, being a moral patient (not having rights individually) does not necessarily mean that one cannot hold rights as part of a collective. Why we should object to moral patienthood is once again not clear.

It could be that, when lodging the complaint that the global poor are treated as moral patients, we are in fact taking the view that the duties to help the global poor are duties of justice, and that the poor *do* have rights against the rich. Perhaps what we are bothered about is that as a duty-bearer one is called on to act (to engage

<sup>50</sup>See, respectively, Kuper (2002, 116) and Deveaux (2015).

<sup>51</sup>Kuper 2002; Deveaux 2015.



one's agency) but the object of that person's duty, despite being a right-holder, is not. The right-holder is not enjoined to act, it is true; but she is *morally empowered* to act, to claim what is hers by moral right, if the duty-bearer does not act in the morally mandated way. The object of another's duty is not *just* an object, on this reading of the situation; she has a right against the duty-bearer, a right she is morally entitled to demand to be fulfilled.<sup>52</sup> In being a right-holder, the recipient of justice finds herself in a position of moral strength. The burden of justice lays on the duty-bearer, who is at a *moral disadvantage* – she must take action to discharge her duty (which might be costly to herself).

In practice however being morally in a position of strength can easily go hand-in-hand with being in a materially precarious situation, depending upon others to discharge their duties. One's material situation is a separate issue from one's moral position. Yet, objections to the global poor being treated as moral patients tend to conflate the two: the global poor have rights against others and are in a position of moral strength; their status as a moral patient – as the object of others' duties – is not the problem. The problem is, instead, that they are in a precarious *material* situation that makes them (1) crucially dependent on others discharging the duties they have toward them and (2) which leaves them without any practical capacity to defend the moral rights they have against others (rich donors, charities, and NGOs). It may be that by 'moral patient' we want to refer to precisely that situation: someone who has rights against others, but who is unable to claim or defend those rights due to external constraints.

Finally, we want to isolate a different way of understanding the 'moral patienthood' objection, one that focuses on the *relational inequality* of moral relationships.<sup>53</sup> Can being the target of other people's duties be morally problematic in any way? Can justice relationships (relationships characterized by the distribution of rights and duties) be unjust in some way? This may seem a bizarre question; it is less so once we put individual justice relationships into larger, structural, perspective. Of course, we are all beneficiaries of justice; we all benefit from others discharging their duties toward us. So are we all moral patients. Yet, we may believe it problematic when some individuals are trapped in that role pretty much exclusively throughout their life, rather than being agents (duty-bearers) and patients (rights-claimants) in turn. This lack of symmetry is what makes, in the case of the global poor, being a recipient of justice problematic, since entrenched global inequality means that some individuals will always be on the recipient end of duties of justice in the long term, possibly for their entire lives. They cannot be equal moral agents with the rich of the world, since they will never be themselves in a position to do things for others as others have done for them. The global poor are thus not in a relationship of equal moral agency with the global rich.

This relational inequality is intrinsic to many forms of transnational altruism. The principle of democratic altruism cannot rectify this situation completely. But it can help to mitigate this relational inequality by morally empowering the poor to a greater extent. Democratic altruism allows the poor to exercise formative

<sup>52</sup>For Hart (1955), this means that the rights-bearer has the choice of whether to demand or to waive the duties of the duty-bearer.

<sup>53</sup>Anderson 1999; Lippert-Rasmussen 2018.

agency in decisions that are currently under others' control. Thus it goes some way toward compensating the relational inequality between the rich and the poor.

### **Pragmatic advantages**

So far, we have been arguing for democratic altruism on grounds of justice. But democratic altruism would bring various pragmatic benefits as well. One is epistemic.

Epistemic democrats have long hailed the advantages of democratic decision-making, both majoritarian and deliberative. They have also stressed the importance of the number and the diversity of cognitive profiles of the decision-makers. For a collective decision to track any truth or, more practically, locate effective solutions for collective problems, it is essential that those making the decisions hold diverse information and assess it independently from one another.<sup>54</sup> Insofar as the global poor have 'situated knowledge' about the problems they face, which is not easily available to the international charities and NGOs trying to solve these same problems, it makes sense to actively involve the global poor in the formulation of their programs and policies.<sup>55</sup>

Local organizations initiated by the poor themselves have been shown to perform well when it comes to rural development.<sup>56</sup> Evidence from community development also suggests that participatory initiatives making use of local knowledge have enduring positive outcomes. Take an example:

To ensure that food aid reaches the intended population, a Food for Work program of the Nepalese government assisted by GTZ, consulted with the villagers. It was jointly determined that using local distributors and community-based supervision would be the most appropriate way to distribute food aid deliveries. Instead of using covered trucks, bullock carts were used for transportation. This approach yielded various benefits. Hiring bullock carts provided additional income for rural communities as opposed to using city-based truck companies. The load of a bullock cart is a local standard, and the amounts delivered easily calculated by the people of the community. Any missing portion could easily be estimated publicly and any loss or inappropriate allocation could be questioned in public. Other WFP programs in the country have eventually adopted this approach.<sup>57</sup>

Even the World Bank has increasingly involved the poor in its programs over the last 20 years. As early as 1997 the organization found out that 'communities already have substantial skills. Local capacity exists, but needs empowerment to be harnessed'.<sup>58</sup> Thus the Bank involved the poor in its poverty assessment – it asked

<sup>54</sup>Landemore 2013; Goodin and Spiekermann 2018.

<sup>55</sup>Haraway 1988.

<sup>56</sup>Esman and Uphoff 1984 cited in Narayan *et al.* 2000, 143.

<sup>57</sup>Upadhyaya and Beier 1993 cited in World Bank *n.d.* See also World Bank (2004) for a review of the impact of indigenous knowledge and Narayan (2002) for a more general discussion of why the empowerment of local communities matters in development.

<sup>58</sup>World Bank 2013.

the poor themselves what poverty is, what its causes are, and what solutions should be adopted through their communities. In doing so, the World Bank managed to include in its assessments multidimensional and culturally contingent aspects of poverty.<sup>59</sup> It concluded that ‘poor women and men have detailed knowledge and have context-specific criteria about who is poor and not poor’.<sup>60</sup> The World Bank has also widely adopted community-driven development programs that give local communities power over planning and investment decisions. According to it, ‘these programs have consistently shown an ability to deliver an increase in access to quality infrastructure and services in a cost-effective manner, in ways that have broad community support’.<sup>61</sup>

One good way of incorporating the knowledge of the poor into decision-making would be through deliberative processes that would allow donors and recipients to engage in problem-solving together (we elaborate on this in the next section).<sup>62</sup> Deliberative designs can facilitate the discovery of generalizable interests and integrate diverse perspectives on complex social problems.<sup>63</sup> Participatory deliberative processes involving a wide range of participants are also more likely to solve complex problems such as global poverty. Different subsets of deliberators can be pre-occupied with different aspects of the same problem reducing thereby the cognitive burden on each deliberator.<sup>64</sup> And the communicative interaction between these different sets of deliberators allows them to have a holistic understanding of the problem, thus increasing the group’s chance to find appropriate solutions to it.

There are other additional pragmatic reasons why the global poor should exercise formative agency when it comes to selecting the programs that are supposed to benefit them. One is that the success of any given program may depend on the support and cooperation of its recipients. They require ‘buy in’, and engaging beneficiaries in the selection and design of projects helps to secure that. This is a standard rationale for participatory development projects. Furthermore, programs must be sensitive to the skills and customs of the recipients to ensure their participation. The ‘success of many projects also turns on effecting significant changes in the productive, political, or reproductive practices of those who are meant to participate’, as Leif Wenar observes.<sup>65</sup> There are plenty of examples of infrastructure projects that have failed because they were not attuned to recipients’ capabilities and customs.<sup>66</sup>

But what about a situation where the poor’s participation and their exercise of formative agency would lead to suboptimal results? ‘What if the poor’s involvement will compromise the maximization of welfare?’, some might ask. Shouldn’t we

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<sup>59</sup>Narayan *et al.* 2000, 13–15. Notice that during the same consultations, the poor pointed out to some important limitations of NGO activity – e.g. the tendency of these organizations to operate in certain areas (towns or cities that are easily accessible); their lack of transparency; their decisions to advantage a particular subset of vulnerable people; or their decision to invest in certain programs over others. See *ibid.*, 136–38.

<sup>60</sup>Narayan *et al.* 2000, 274.

<sup>61</sup>World Bank 2019.

<sup>62</sup>Dryzek 1990; Mercier and Landemore 2012.

<sup>63</sup>Dryzek 1990, 57.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 70–75.

<sup>65</sup>Wenar 2011, 112.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*

prefer then to promote the poor's interests, even if that means disrespecting their formative agency? Let us say firmly from the start that we do not accept this premise. We believe that, as affected parties, the poor know quite well their interests and how to serve them<sup>67</sup> – their problem is simply that they lack the means to do so.<sup>68</sup> But for the sake of the argument let us assume that they don't.

Even so, we have no reason to believe that others (NGOs, effective altruists, you, and I) know either what's the best way to alleviate global poverty. Our decisions are made under uncertainty and with imperfect information. Besides that, all too often NGOs claiming to help the poor are stubbornly supporting a certain type of intervention or program because that is their trademark. And, as previously mentioned, all too often other types of (economic) interests and (self-interested) motivations are involved in the decision of how donations will be used. So, it is not immediately clear that involving the poor would compromise a perfect solution.

Second, we don't want to deny the existence of expertise about global poverty. But our proposal for letting the poor have a choice over how funds will be spent is perfectly consistent with offering them an open list of policy options compiled with the help of experts in development economics or, even better, with letting them deliberate about options with input from experts. The list would contain options that we can reasonably say would benefit them, to a greater or lesser extent, and that have a lower or higher risk of being unsuccessful or even harmful. Even if the poor do not choose the option that development economists uniformly agree would best maximize the welfare of the poor, this is a cost that would be morally justifiable in virtue of other moral values and considerations we should be sensitive to – respecting poor's formative agency and their capacity to have a say in matters that greatly affect their fate.

Suppose that experts are more epistemically reliable when making such decisions than the poor themselves, and the risk that they would be wrong is smaller than the poor's. The fact remains that, in unilaterally making such decisions, experts would be imposing their risk-of-being-wrong on the poor who would have to bear the consequences of their decisions. It would be a risk not voluntarily assumed by the poor. Imposing risks of harm or waste on the poor would be morally problematic, given that there is always a chance that an intervention might go wrong and, if it does, the poor will have to bear the costs (if only the opportunity costs of the failed investment). By letting the poor have a say in such decisions, we let them voluntarily assume such risks in matters that greatly affect their lives. Perhaps we would not insist upon this were the stakes of the poor in these decisions less important than they are. But considering the difference in the stakes that donors and recipients have in these decisions, we believe that paternalistic interventions, even if well-intended and more likely to be 'right', would nonetheless be misplaced.

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<sup>67</sup>By that we mean that each poor person knows his or her own interests, not that the interests of all poor people are the same. That they are not is why we need the deliberative fora recommended in the fourth section to facilitate discussions among the poor collectively, concerning which of their competing interests to prioritize.

<sup>68</sup>This was confirmed by Narayan *et al.* 2000.

## Democratic altruism in practice

Altruism can reinforce a hierarchical order of formative agency. That creates a legitimacy deficit, which can be analyzed in the language of politics and remedied through the practice of democracy. We have argued, accordingly, that the poor should be able to exercise formative agency by having a say in how charitable donations toward global poverty alleviation will be spent. Donors themselves cannot act in accordance with the ethical principle of democratic altruism unless the poor have channels through which they can exercise formative agency. The principle of democratic altruism calls for the establishment of fora through which the poor themselves can express their views as to which programs or organizations they deem worthy. The ethical principle of democratic altruism requires democratizing altruism as a *social practice*.

### ***A transnational deliberative system: accountable donors, accountable communities***

Democratization could be sought locally, for example, in a village deciding whether it is better for some individuals to get improved housing vs. the village as a whole getting a safer water supply. Collective agency means community control, which in turn can be joined to the long-established idea of participatory development. Community control does not necessarily mean local democracy or local justice, however, as local political inequalities might mean that resources do not flow to those most in need. Local politics can be just as corrupt and elite-dominated as national and transnational politics. What might check local hierarchy and corruption is an *accountability* link from local communities to donors: local communities should be accountable for their expenditures, and accountable for the political arrangements they use to allocate those expenditures. Donors could then withdraw funding if no satisfactory account is provided. But the accountability should run the other way too: donors should be accountable for imposing the political standards that they do, and for the choices they make about which communities to fund and which not to fund. In other words, we can think of a deliberative system encompassing big donors, international charities, representatives, and recipients of aid, in which all the participants have to justify their decisions and principles to the others within the system.

This idea of a transnational deliberative system can be scaled up to an encompassing global level. And collective formative agency can extend to any level and scope – it is just a matter of organization. At the global level, the scope could involve not just the destination and use of charitable giving. It could also involve questions about trading relationships that systematically disadvantage the poor, about environmental and labor standards, and about the activities of large corporations promoting biotechnology and chemical-intensive agriculture.

If we think more narrowly about charitable donations, the global poor's rights to have a say in transnational altruism – to act as formative agents of justice – are best conceived as collective rights. They belong to the poor collectively rather than to any given individual; and they are directed against other collective agents (foundations, NGOs, and *GiveWell*) that coordinate altruistic efforts and centralize individual donations rather than against any given individual who donates small sums of money to these collective agents. To be clear, we are not arguing that Malika – a

poor mother from Sudan – should tell *you* what cause or organization to support or how much to donate. That would run into the standard problem of any individual's contribution to collective action imposing a substantial burden on her while making little difference to the outcome. Rather, Malika, together with other similarly situated individuals,<sup>69</sup> should have some kind of collective voice in influencing how your money (provided you choose to donate to alleviating global poverty) and other people's money contributing to the same cause will make a difference on the ground. The way of doing that is to give Malika and others like her some leverage in the decision-making of those organizations collecting individual donations like yours.

We can, then, think in terms of a deliberative system encompassing donors and recipients to accompany and regulate the monetary transactions that join them; this can be thought of as a potentially *democratic* deliberative system.

### **Democratizing moves**

The political practice that results here would not be a matter of constructing a transnational democracy along state-like lines. It would not be a comprehensive association conferring anything like sovereign authority. Indeed, it is not helpful to think here of any full-fledged *model* of democracy at all. What we can think about instead is how to make democratizing moves for the political system whose hierarchies are reinforced by transnational altruism and altruists.

The first such move would be the establishment of what Forst (in a different context) calls a 'right to justification' for the global poor.<sup>70</sup> The standard deliberative-democratic version of this right is that people have the right to a justification for the political order to which they are subject from those creating, reinforcing, or imposing this order. The poor too have a similar right to justification of who is and is not helped, and how, from the charities and organizations making those decisions.

The exercise of such a right requires the establishment of channels of influence and accountability connecting poor and donors that are currently mostly absent. These channels could involve:

- Tribunals open to claims by the poor, before which organizations channeling donations could appear in order to justify their choices. Of course, opening such tribunals is one thing, securing the attendance of resource-poor individuals preoccupied with the struggle to survive is another thing altogether. The precise form of such tribunals could be a matter for experimentation. The role of the poor – or, more realistically, organizations representing them – could involve appearing as complainants and as witnesses.
- Social movements organized by the poor. Deveaux argues that such movements can enable the poor themselves to be effective formative argents of

<sup>69</sup>By 'similarly situated individuals' we mean all those in the catchment area where an organization operates, or the meaningful unit the organization takes into account for program implementation and resource distribution (e.g. over the territory of a village, county, region, country, or worldwide). Thus, we need deliberative forums assembling representatives of the poor that would operate at different levels (village, county, region, country, continents, and worldwide).

<sup>70</sup>Forst 2011.

justice.<sup>71</sup> This is true, but there is a problem: some of the poor have been better at organizing such movements than others. So *La Via Campesina* has done a pretty good job in organizing Latin American peasants and making their concerns evident on the global stage (less in connection with aid than with climate change, food security, agricultural policy, and opposition to biotechnology). Its coverage elsewhere in the world is patchy, and it does not reach those who are not peasants (e.g. urban slum dwellers). Activist organizations such as *La Via Campesina* are never cause-neutral; their purpose is to advance particular causes.<sup>72</sup> At any rate, requiring (say) the Gates Foundation to justify its promotion of corporate-controlled biotechnology in developing countries in terms that *La Via Campesina* could accept would be a major advance in accountability in a deliberative system.

- Deliberative assemblies abiding by standard deliberative-democratic norms of inclusivity and respect for all affected parties, operating at various levels with targeted recruitment of the poor. Elected assemblies are not feasible in a global context, but it would be relatively straightforward to constitute citizens' assemblies drawn from those affected by a particular program in a particular place (such as malaria control in Nigeria) or set of programs (such as those pertaining to public health in a region of Africa) or the activities of one prominent donor (such as the Gates Foundation). Such assemblies could be regional, national, or cross-national; simultaneous translation can solve language problems. Experience around the world suggests that anyone can be an effective deliberator given the opportunity and resources.<sup>73</sup> Wisor develops such a proposal in the context of global deliberations about the Sustainable Development Goals<sup>74</sup>; our proposal is less ambitious in scope, helping constitute a 'democracy of the affected' by any program or set of programs. Donors as well as experts could participate in these assemblies alongside the poor and express their views as to what programs or policies they themselves think the poor should choose and why. The final decision over how donations will be used on the ground should however belong uniquely to the poor.
- Deliberative valuation. The field of ecological economics has developed the idea of deliberative monetary valuation (DMV) as an alternative to expert assessment in valuing public goods when doing cost-benefit analysis. DMV attaches monetary values to public goods (such as ecosystem wellbeing) based on the reflective judgment of a panel of citizens – as opposed to the calculations of an economist. Deliberative valuation does not however have to use money as a metric; and participating citizens can take a broader view of how any metric should inform decision.<sup>75</sup> This idea could be applied to the calculations of effective altruists or donor organizations, with the panel in question being recruited from actual or potential poor recipients of programs. The panel could reach judgment on the comparative value of the benefits of

<sup>71</sup>Deveaux 2018.

<sup>72</sup>They would thus make effective altruists uneasy, given cause-neutrality is a defining feature of effective altruism.

<sup>73</sup>See Sanyal and Rao 2019.

<sup>74</sup>Wisor 2012.

<sup>75</sup>Lo and Spash 2013.



programs or organizations under consideration, as well as the validity of metrics such as lives saved compared with alternative metrics.

- A global dissent channel that provides a medium for the expression and transmission of dissenting opinions.<sup>76</sup> The channel could be set up under United Nations auspices. Charities such as Oxfam or meta-charities such as *GiveWell* could sign up to this channel, and promise to respond to any opinions about their operations. Access to the channel could be difficult for the very poor who lack Internet access, although the spread of mobile phone technology could alleviate this problem.<sup>77</sup> The crowdsourcing of dissent could enable the participation of large numbers of individuals while enabling their participation to converge on a single complaint (or small set of complaints). Any danger of the channel being overwhelmed by organized campaigns could be countered by institutionalizing a filter such as a transnational forum composed of lay citizens.

These are just examples of possible democratizing moves. It is also possible to learn from existing efforts to involve the poor in global governance. The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 was preceded by global consultations unprecedented in scope and variety.<sup>78</sup> The need to involve the very poor was recognized at an early stage in process design; the implementation was patchy and haphazard, with a few locally organized consultations in developing countries (e.g. a 2-day consultation with poor and marginalized communities in Ghana). More systematically, the Participate Initiative entailed a network of 18 participatory research organizations working in 29 countries with marginalized people, the focus of which was on ‘what sorts of interventions and activities actually seem to improve people’s lives’.<sup>79</sup> The Initiative listened to stories from poor people themselves. Its influence in the complex political process that yielded the SDGs is hard to trace, though Shahrokh and Wheeler point to its ‘global synthesis report which has had recognizable influence on the post-2015 debate’ as well as ‘dynamic policy interactions between those living in poverty and those with political authority through Ground Level Panels (GLPs)’.<sup>80</sup> If this kind of engagement can be targeted at policy makers, surely it can also be done for charitable donors.

## Conclusion

Transnational altruism enters the domain of justice in a big way. As such, its practice needs to be democratized. One way of doing this would be through the moral principle of democratic altruism which would impose a duty on donors to give money in a way that is consistent with the requests of the poor as well. By allowing the poor to have a say in how charitable donations are spent, the principle would

<sup>76</sup>Dryzek and Pickering 2019, 159–60.

<sup>77</sup>According to the UN’s International Telecommunications Union (2019, 5), three quarters of people in the least developed countries have mobile cellular subscriptions, and fully a third have active mobile-broadband subscriptions.

<sup>78</sup>Dryzek and Tanasoca forthcoming.

<sup>79</sup>Burns *et al.* 2013, 79.

<sup>80</sup>Shahrokh and Wheeler 2014, 8, 11.

yield moral, epistemic, and political benefits. In practice, however, the principle could not be adopted by donors unless the global poor have available channels through which they can specify which programs and organizations they endorse. Allowing both rich and poor to exercise formative agency requires them to be equal co-participants in a global deliberative system that would promote accountability on both sides.

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