the moral demands of affluence

GARRETT CULLITY

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THE MORAL DEMANDS OF AFFLUENCE
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The Moral Demands of Affluence

GARRETT CULLITY
For Adrienne,

life-enhancer
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Preface

This book has been a long time in the writing—longer, no doubt, than the results justify. I have been working on it, on and off, since my doctoral studies, and many institutions and people have helped me in that time.

Various institutions have supported my work throughout the gestation of the ideas presented here. My doctoral studies were financed through scholarship support from the Shell International Petroleum Company and the Rank Xerox Corporation. St Andrews University supported two periods of research leave during my time as a member of its Moral Philosophy Department. The Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland funded my travel during one of those periods, when I was generously hosted by the Philosophy Department at Monash University. More recently I have been helped by a University Research Grant at the University of Adelaide. And my work on the final draft was made possible by a Discovery—Projects Grant from the Australian Research Council.

A few sentences in the book have appeared in previously published work. I thank the publishers of the following pieces for reprinting permission:


Thanking everyone who has helped me to think about the various topics that contribute to this book would be impossible (if only for the unsatisfactory reason that my memory isn’t good enough). But I will, perhaps invidiously, single some people out for special thanks. First of all, my doctoral thesis was supervised with great acuity and helpfulness by Jonathan Glover, Derek Parfit, and James Griffin. I have been fortunate enough to receive further comments on entire drafts of the book from Derek Parfit since then: like very many other moral philosophers, I owe a lot to the generosity with which he has shared his intellectual gifts. The searching criticism of my doctoral examiners, Onora O’Neill and the late Bernard Williams, also had a big influence on my subsequent thinking about this topic. And the same goes for many other people at various times since then: among them, I am especially grateful to Will Aiken, David Archard, Marcia Baron, John Broome, Tim Chappell, Tony Coady, Ramon Das, Berys Gaut, Paul Gomberg, John Haldane, Virginia Held, Brad Hooker, Keith Horton, Ian Hunt, Frank Jackson, Jennifer Jackson, Susan Khin Zaw, James Lenman, Thad Metz, Tim Mulgan, Alex Neill, Basil O’Neill, Philip Pettit, Alan Ryan, Daniel Shapiro,
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Peter Singer, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, John Skorupski, Howard Sobel, Janna Thompson, Peter Unger, and Suzanne Uniacke. Several anonymous readers provided very insightful comments on an earlier draft. One whose anonymity I managed to unravel was Larry Temkin, whom I thank for an extraordinarily detailed and stimulating set of comments. Peter Mayer kindly shared his expertise in the politics of development work. And for research assistance during my work on the final draft, I am grateful to Peter Quigley, Nicole Vincent, and Chris Walsh.

I doubt whether any of these people will agree with the following pages. I don’t know: none of them has seen the final draft. However, they have all helped to convince me that I had to throw out previous, less satisfactory ones. Many, just as importantly, have encouraged me to continue thinking that the project is worthwhile. And a few have pressed on me what, for someone with my temperament, is perhaps the most important advice of all: ‘It will never be perfect—just finish it!’

This is a book about aid to the world’s poorest people, and how much you and I ought to be doing to support it. I have spent some periods of my life working, in a modest way, for the kinds of aid agencies I write about here. In doing so, I suppose I displayed some competence, if not much initiative or talent. (Nothing, at any rate, like the qualities of my former boss at Community Aid Abroad in Perth, Jeremy Hobbs, who is now the Director of Oxfam International.) These days, I do give money to Oxfam and Amnesty International, but I do not spend any of my time working for them. Instead, I spend it writing about why it is morally justifiable for me not to be doing so, teaching philosophy, and playing with my children. No doubt part of the grip of this topic for me comes from a need to justify to myself why I am not doing more than this. But I should not convey the impression that I spend a lot of time worrying about whether this is right—and I think that is as it should be. This book attempts to justify that attitude. But as is often the case—both in philosophy and in practical decision-making—I have fewer doubts about my conclusions than I have about whether I have succeeded in accurately articulating the reasons for them.

There is something undeniably odd about describing a major part of your life’s work as writing a book that attempts to justify the activity of writing that book. However, if the question addressed in these pages is real, we need an answer to it. And the question is real. Is this book the answer to it? It would be too much to hope that I will succeed in convincing many readers of that. No one writing primarily for an audience of philosophers should delude himself on that score. The view for which I argue—a view intermediate between two more commonly argued extremes—runs the risk of pleasing no one. It will seem over-earnest and moralistic to some readers; a complacent whitewash to others. However, I do hold out the hope that some will concede that I am half right; and others, that I am instructively wrong. That would still be progress, of a sort.
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Introduction

Anyonewho makes some effort to acquaint him- or herself with what the world is like will soon appreciate that, for many millions of people who live outside the cocoon of security and comfort that we enjoy, it is horrible: a wasteland of suffering, deprivation, and injustice. This raises two obvious and urgent questions: Why? And what needs to be done in order to change this? In my view, the core of a cogent answer is this. Poverty is disempowerment, and fighting it means establishing structures of political accountability that can afford protection against the extremes of human vulnerability.

However, defending that view is not the focus of this book. I shall say something about it in what follows—but nothing original: the chapter in which I discuss these first two questions will draw entirely on the opinions of other writers who are much better qualified to answer them. Instead, the focus of this book is on a third, different question: How much ought you and I to be doing about other people’s desperate need? We are part of the minority of the world’s population able to command enough resources to enjoy a life of ease, comfort, and privilege. How much of those resources ought we to be using to help the many people who suffer from extreme material want? The book is arranged in two parts. Part I argues that this is a real and insistent moral question that needs to be answered by any affluent person. Part II then defends an answer. (In doing so, it also spells out how affluent you have to be for the question to apply.)

To say that my question is different from those first two is not to say any more than that. It is not to say that it can substitute for those questions, nor that it can be answered independently. In particular, I want to disclaim emphatically the idea that exhorting people to individual philanthropy could in itself be seen as an appropriate solution to the problems of world poverty; or that, for individuals, the question of how best to help people who need it can be answered in a politically neutral way. However, I do think that, for anyone who is not a fatalist about human misery, the question I am asking does arise, and calls for answer. If there are effective things that can be done, how much ought I to be doing to support them?

The book does not discuss all of the reasons that might be given for thinking that I ought to use my resources to help the destitute. Rather, it concentrates on an argument from beneficence: that is, an argument that
simply grounds the moral case for helping the poor directly in their pressing need for assistance. This is not the only reason for thinking that affluent individuals morally ought to help the poor, but it is the simplest and most forceful: I shall explain this in the first two chapters.

The starting point for my argument is simple and familiar: it is a ‘life-saving analogy’ between helping people at a distance, through aid agencies, and saving a person’s life directly, with your own hands. This analogy, familiar from Peter Singer’s comparison of giving money to aid agencies with pulling a drowning child from a pond, is by now well known to philosophers—perhaps even hackneyed. However, I think its widespread use says something about its force: a force that it has independently of the utilitarianism with which it is associated in Singer’s thought. So, at least, I shall argue in Chapters 1 and 2.

The simplicity of this analogy does help to make a forceful moral point. However, there are good grounds for thinking that it is not only simple, but simplistic. Some critics have complained that it is misleading, even demeaning, to compare destitute Africans to drowning children. They have a point. In some humanitarian crises, a closer analogy would be with domestic abuse. And in all cases, the situation is more complicated than a case of simple rescue. As Sadako Ogata (UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 1991–2000) has said, ‘there are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems.’ Humanitarian action may palliate, but it does not cure. It is important to recognize this. However, there remains an important truth in the simple analogy. It is that we are morally required to help. There is help that we can give, and there is no excuse for not giving it. The many disanalogies do not affect this fact.

Part I defends these claims, and then asks how far this moral requirement extends. In Chapter 5 I present the case for thinking that this leads towards an extremely demanding view: the view that each of us is morally required to renounce spending on practically all of the things from which we currently get enjoyment and fulfilment, in order to do as much as possible to help people who have nothing. Some philosophers accept this. Many others find it absurd, myself included. Indeed, the absurdity of the extremely demanding view is sometimes used as a premiss in arguments on this topic. By contrast, I think it is a conclusion that stands in need of justification, and I aim to supply that justification in Part II.

In discussing this topic, guilt-inducing metaphors are easy to produce. Moreover, there is a good deal of truth in them. We do inhabit a bubble of privilege, floating on a deep pool of human misery. But such metaphors can be misleading. We should not suggest that there is a radical separation in the human experiences and fulfilsments of rich and poor. We do not inhabit separate worlds. ‘The poor’ are people like us, in horrible circumstances. That, of course, is part of what raises so acutely the question I am discussing.
But it is also, I shall argue, part of the answer to that question. I call the argument presented in Part II an argument from the presuppositions of beneficence. Its strategy is to draw attention to the range of goods—above and beyond the basic good of being alive—that ground requirements on us to help each other. And it shows how these requirements only make sense on the assumption that a life of a certain kind—a life that is not restricted in the extremely demanding way—is one that it is not wrong for us to live.

The conclusion I defend does still demand more of us than many of us find comfortable, but it is moderately rather than extremely demanding. My aim in this book is not to preach. (What could be more counter-productive, in writing for an audience of philosophers?) But I think it is important not to duck the challenge of spelling out the practical implications of my argument, and I do that in Chapter 10.

I have made an effort to be careful, but I hope not excruciatingly so: to take an important topic and make it dull would be unforgivable. There is a quick way to read the book, to see whether the rest of it is worth the trouble. Chapters 1, 2, and 5 contain the essence of the challenge presented by Part I; Chapters 8, 9, and 10 give the main structure of my reply to that challenge. Even if you are reading all of the chapters, do not bother with the endnotes, unless you are interested in my references to other literature and asides.
Part I

DEMANDS
The Life-Saving Analogy

We inhabit a world in which the lives of many millions of people are impaired and shortened by extreme material poverty.¹ How much ought affluent people—people like you and me—to be doing to help them? There are different ways of reading this question. One of them furnishes the subject of this book.

One way to take the question is to see it as asking what we collectively ought to be doing.² Many people are prepared to agree that the answer to this is: much more than we actually are. (The people of the world’s richer countries currently give about 0.26 per cent of their gross national income in government and non-government ‘aid’ of one kind or another to the poorer ones.)³ But you can agree with this while believing that you are not personally open to moral criticism. After all, there is nothing you can personally do that would itself make the difference between our collectively doing or failing to do what we ought.

The other way of reading the question, though, addresses it to each of us individually rather than all of us collectively. Arguably, every taxpayer is already doing something for the very poor, in contributing through tax to government-funded aid programmes. But what ought you to be doing in addition to this? Let us sharpen the question further. Asking what you ought to do can be taken as an invitation to say what would be best—what it would be good to aspire to as an ideal. Or it can be taken as a question about what it would be wrong not to do. We can think that a certain standard of conduct is best—is especially admirable—and still feel comfortable about not meeting that standard ourselves. However, let us look at the tougher question: What standard of conduct towards the poor should we feel morally uncomfortable with? What is the amount which it would be wrong not to give to help them?

It is this question, addressed to each of us individually, that I shall try to answer in this book. That is not because I think that the individual question takes precedence over the collective one. There is a clear sense in which the first, collective question is more important. The only way ultimately to end the scandal of world poverty will be by large-scale collective action—and this will not simply be a matter of raising levels of material ‘aid’ from rich to poor, either, but requires transforming the political, economic, and social
structures that produce these patterns of deprivation.\textsuperscript{4} I emphasize this point at the outset, because I do not want to create the impression that I think individual philanthropy is the answer to world poverty.\textsuperscript{5} However, the importance of asking what should be done on a global scale about the forces that create and sustain poverty—a question that applies to us all collectively—should not lead us to ignore the further question that applies to each of us individually. How much should \textit{I} be doing to help the poor? I do not want to suggest that this is \textit{the} moral question about world poverty. But it is a question each of us needs to answer, and it is the question I am going to try to answer here.

The first part of my answer is supplied in Part I. It argues that affluent individuals are acting morally wrongly if they do not privately contribute their time and money to voluntary humanitarian or other aid agencies, over and above the contributions they may be making as taxpayers to the aid programmes supported by their governments.\textsuperscript{6} In itself, perhaps, this is not a very contentious conclusion. Of course, there are those who disagree with it, and that alone makes it worth trying to show fully why we ought to believe it. But there are many people who believe it already. It is at least as much to them, however, that this first part of the book is addressed. For what anyone who accepts this claim wants to know is, Where does it leave us? If giving up nothing is wrong, how much must I give up before I have done enough? We can only answer this by carefully examining the argument for thinking it wrong to do nothing: we need to see how much further that argument extends. And when we do, we shall find that it threatens to extend a very long way indeed. So far, in fact, that Part I will leave us with the challenge of seeing how to avoid saying that we must give up so much that we jeopardize practically all the sources of personal fulfillment in our lives.

In Part II, however, I shall argue that this challenge can be met. One particular question has just been picked out concerning what the affluent should do for the poor. Now let us narrow our attention further. There are different ways of arguing for the conclusion that it is wrong for affluent individuals not to contribute privately to helping the poor. I shall be focusing on one of them in particular.

Arguments for this conclusion can be divided into two broad classes.\textsuperscript{7} In the first, there are what we can call \textit{collectively based} arguments: these yield conclusions about what each affluent individual ought to be doing for the poor, but derive those conclusions from claims about what we ought to be doing collectively. The most familiar collectively based arguments are arguments from \textit{justice}. For example, there is the following argument from rectificatory justice: we are collectively responsible for the injustice done in creating and sustaining other people’s poverty, this puts us under a duty to redress that injustice, and I must discharge my share of that duty.\textsuperscript{8} Each of us ought to help them because we together are responsible for their needing...
help. Another possibility is an argument from distributive rather than rectificatory justice. This holds that it is simply the fact that the world’s resources are inequitably distributed, rather than the explanation of how that distribution came about, that gives us a duty to change it, and makes it wrong for me not to discharge my share of this collective duty. A third, distinct possibility is an argument from regulative justice, objecting to the rules that currently govern international trade and financial accountability—to the rules themselves, rather than the distributions resulting from their application. These rules, it might well be argued, unfairly enforce others’ poverty for our advantage; we are collectively responsible for reforming them; and I ought to play my part in doing so.

In this book I shall be concentrating on an argument that is different from these. It is not an argument from justice. And the initial version of it that I shall set out shortly is individually rather than collectively based: it does not derive its conclusions from claims about what we ought to be doing collectively. It is not that arguments from justice of the kinds just mentioned are implausible. It is just that, given the complexity of the issues that need to be resolved in order to develop them convincingly, I could not hope to discuss them thoroughly alongside the argument I do discuss. A convincing argument from rectificatory justice, for example, would need to settle the complicated economic and other historical questions required in order to identify the causes of the current stark disparities in global standards of living. But that would only be a first step. It would need to defend a principle for the transmission of responsibility over time, in order to support the claim that we now bear responsibility for injustices committed by past members of groups to which we belong; and it would need to defend a principle of derivation that generates demands on individuals out of such collective responsibilities. I could not hope to do all of that adequately in a book that discussed anything else.

The argument I focus on in this book is simpler and more direct, but at least as familiar and influential. It avoids these complexities, and I think this makes it more forceful. Furthermore, it threatens to support a much stronger and more troubling conclusion. The conclusion that it is most natural to draw from a collectively based argument is that the amount I must give up in order not to be doing wrong—as I shall put it, the amount that can be morally ‘demanded’ or ‘required’ of me—is my own fair share of what we ought collectively to be doing. It is not obvious straight off what that ‘fair share’ is: there is plenty of scope for debating how shares of a collective responsibility should be divided among the members of the group that bears it. However, it is at least arguable that, if the costs of eliminating poverty were appropriately divided among the world’s affluent, giving up my share would still leave me plenty to spend on myself. Certainly, it is standardly claimed to be one of the virtues of a ‘fair share’ view of