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### Alleviating Global Poverty: Moral Duty, Justice, and Institutional Responsibility

The persistence of global poverty in a world of unprecedented wealth raises an underlying question of morality: are individuals or societies obligated to alleviate the suffering of other people? Poverty speaks not only to the condition of individual deprivation, but also to broader patterns of distribution and inequality. Raimo Väyrynen argues that inequality mirrors how resources are distributed within a system, and poverty is a systemic product of political, economic, and institutional forces (Väyrynen, p. 9–11). This structure challenges the view that poverty is merely accidental or natural and implies moral responsibilities from those who benefit from or participate in such systems. Philosophers offer a range of competing perspectives around the extent of this obligation: Peter Singer defends a demanding view, arguing that individuals are morally required to prevent suffering whenever they can do so at a small cost (Singer, p. 239). Alternatively, Thomas Pogge allocates responsibility to global institutions, claiming that affluent, first world societies contribute to and sustain conditions of poverty (Phillips, p. 405). Meanwhile, John Rawls, and Amartya Sen emphasize justice and fairness, arguing that social arrangements must secure the well-being and opportunities of the least advantaged (Yükselbaba, p. 550; Peacock, 2017). However, a

Kantian perspective raises doubts about the extent of individual obligations, instead placing sole responsibility on the state (Hadsell, p. 200-201). This essay argues that while there is a genuine moral obligation to alleviate poverty, the responsibility lies primarily with institutions, as individual efforts are structurally limited.

By critically assessing these competing perspectives, the essay will show that addressing poverty is best understood as a matter of justice embedded in social and political structures. While Rawls and Sen emphasize fair institutions and expanded capabilities as ethical frameworks to address poverty, empirical evidence shows that structural factors such as deindustrialization, labor market segmentation, and political power distributions play a crucial role in shaping economic outcomes (Brady, p. 162–164).

One powerful argument in favor of the moral obligation to alleviate poverty is from Peter Singer, whose approach is grounded in a utilitarian commitment to reducing suffering. Singer argues that moral judgements should not be influenced by factors such as distance or personal proximity, but instead by whether one has the capacity to prevent harm (Singer, p. 239).

His main claim supporting this is that “if it is in your power to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything nearly as important, it is wrong not to do so” (Singer, p. 239). This principle forms the foundation of his argument that individuals in affluent societies have a direct and significant obligation to assist those living in conditions of extreme poverty. Additionally, Singer introduces the infamous analogy of a drowning child. If an individual can save a drowning child in a shallow pond at minimal cost, such as getting their clothes dirty, it would be clearly be morally wrong

to refrain from acting (Singer, p. 239–242). Singer argues that there is no morally relevant difference between this situation and failing to donate money to alleviate global poverty. In both instances, individuals have the ability to prevent catastrophes at relatively low cost to themselves. He reinforces his stance through further thought experiments, such as the “Bugatti” case, where individuals judge it morally wrong to prioritize personal wealth and benefit over saving the life of a child (Singer, p. 241–242). These examples aim to prove that our everyday moral decisions require a much stronger obligation to assist the global less fortunate than we typically acknowledge.

To elaborate, alleviating poverty is not merely an act of charity but a moral duty. Failing to act is not morally neutral; when we are in a position to prevent serious suffering or death at little cost, choosing not to do so is completely morally wrong. Peter Singer’s argument is compelling because it challenges inconsistencies in our moral reasoning. While we generally accept that we ought to prevent harm in everyday situations where we can easily help, we often fail to apply the same principle to cases of global poverty. Singer highlights this inconsistency by showing that distance or lack of personal connection should not reduce our moral responsibility when we are capable of preventing harm.

If one accepts the lesson of the drowning child, it becomes difficult to justify ignoring the suffering of those in extreme poverty. However, despite its intuitive appeal, Singer's stance has been criticized for being too demanding. Timothy Weidel argues that if Taken literally, Singer's perspective would require individuals to give up “any possible luxury,” since such expenditures could instead be used to save lives (Weidel, p. 947). This would entail a radical transformation

of our everyday lives, where people are ethically required to prioritize the needs of the global poor over most personal consumption. This would be especially difficult in our modern materialistic Western society. While such a standard may be morally admirable, it raises concerns about whether it is realistic to expect individuals to meet such extensive demands.

Furthermore, Weidel underlines a significant motivational issue. Even when individuals recognize the moral reasoning of Singer's argument, they often ignore it when presented with opportunities to help in their own lives (Weidel, p. 949). This highlights a disconnect between moral theory and human behavior. If a moral obligation is too demanding and becomes easily ignored, its practical relevance may be undermined. Overall, Singer provides a powerful argument for a moral obligation to alleviate poverty, grounded in harm prevention. However, its demanding nature and limited real-world applicability suggest it is less extensive than he claims.

While Singer grounds the moral obligation to alleviate poverty in personal duties of aid, Thomas Pogge offers a fundamentally different approach by placing responsibility within global institutional structures. Pogge argues that poverty is not merely an unfortunate condition that demands charitable response, but rather a result of unjust global frameworks in which affluent people and societies are complicit (Phillips, p. 405). As noted by Jared Phillips, people in developed countries “implicitly take part in the global institutions that inflict poverty and rights violations upon millions” (Phillips, p. 405). This shifts the moral focus from a positive duty to help others to a negative duty not to harm them.

This distinction strengthens the case for moral obligation. Duties not to harm are generally considered stricter than acts of charity. On Pogge's account, the affluent are not simply failing to assist the poor but are actively benefiting from and perpetuating systems that disadvantage them (Phillips, p. 405). Global trade arrangements, resource privileges, and economic policies often favour wealthy nations while limiting opportunities for poorer ones. As a result, the moral obligation to alleviate poverty stems from justice rather than generosity, as individuals must reform institutions they participate in that eventually cause harm (Phillips, p. 405).

Compared to Singer, Pogge's argument avoids excessive demandingness, as it does not demand the sacrifice of all non-essential goods. Instead, it calls for political and institutional change, such as reforming international policies or supporting fairer economic systems (Phillips, p. 404-405). In this sense, it offers more plausible account of moral responsibility by distributing the burden across collective structures instead of placing it solely on individuals.

Unfortunately, Pogge's position is not without its flaws. Timothy Weidel criticizes this theory for lacking clear practical guidance. He argues that its prescriptions are "nebulous" in terms of what individuals are actually required to do (Weidel, p. 948). Even if global institutions are unjust, it is unclear how individuals can meaningfully reform them or how much effort fulfills their moral obligations. This uncertainty weakens Pogge's argument by leaving individuals unsure how to act. Phillips questions Pogge's "Western" bias, noting it assumes wealthy societies can reshape global systems in ways that may be paternalistic or unrealistic (Phillips, p. 406). This critique underlines a tension within Pogge's framework between recognizing injustice and

implementing effective solutions. In general, Pogge offers a compelling reframing of the moral obligation to alleviate poverty by grounding it in structural injustice rather than individual charity. While his account strengthens the moral case by emphasizing complicity and harm, its lack of clear practical direction limits its effectiveness as a guide to action.

Kantian ethics approaches poverty from utilitarian perspectives, grounding moral duty not in results but in the intrinsic rights of individuals and the role of public organizations. Immanuel Kant asserts that all humans possess an innate right to freedom, defined as independence from the constraints of others, which must be respected universally (Hadsell, 2023, p. 195). This right extends to the external conditions necessary for individuals to exercise their freedom meaningfully, including access to basic necessities. Poverty, in Kant's view, compromises a person's capacity to act autonomously, making private charity insufficient or even harmful if it creates dependence or humiliation (Hadsell, 2023, p. 200).

Kant further claims that alleviating poverty must therefore be a public, institutional responsibility (Hadsell, 2023, p. 200–201). Private charity is not a substitute for systemic support because it places the recipient in a position of debt and diminishes their dignity. The state, however, has an obligation to structure social and economic systems in ways that protect citizens' freedom to pursue their own ends (Hadsell, 2023, p. 200–201). In addition to enforcing laws against crime, the government bears responsibility for preventing conditions that undermine basic survival. If the state neglects to guarantee external freedom, it shares moral blame for conduct driven by deprivation (Hadsell, 2023, p. 201–203).

Kant's approach emphasizes the ethical necessity of structural interventions rather than reliance on voluntary goodwill. By treating poverty as a violation of freedom and autonomy, Kant provides a moral case for policies that ensure all citizens access to resources and opportunities. This viewpoint reinforces consequentialist arguments by highlighting the moral duty to design social systems that uphold human dignity, not just reduce suffering. Consequently, Kantian ethics shifts the focus from individual moral heroism to collective, state-led responsibility for alleviating poverty (Hadsell, 2023, p. 207).

A more balanced account of ethical duty is provided by John Rawls, who frames poverty as an issue of justice within the basic structure of society. Rawls argues that inequalities in wealth and opportunity are only justified if they benefit the least fortunate in society. This is expressed in his "difference principle," which holds that social and economic inequalities must be arranged to produce the greatest benefit for those worst off (Yükselbaba, p. 550). Since individuals do not merit their natural talents or social starting points, resulting inequalities are morally arbitrary and warrant redress through redistribution (Yükselbaba, p.548).

Rawls therefore grounds the obligation to alleviate poverty not in personal almsgiving, as in Peter Singer, but in the design of fair institutions. A just society must ensure not only formal equality, but fair equality of opportunity. To elaborate, this means that people have genuine access to positions and resources regardless of their background (Yükselbaba, p. 548). This reframes responsibility from individuals to political and economic systems, treating poverty as a structural rather than purely personal issue. Rawls emphasizes that inequalities arising from social position and

natural talents are morally arbitrary and should be addressed through redistribution to benefit the least advantaged (Yükselbaba, p. 548–550).

This account is elaborated by Amartya Sen, who critiques resource-based views of justice by underlining what people are actually able to do and be. As discussed by Mark Peacock, Sen argues that poverty should be seen as a deprivation of basic capabilities, including access to education, remain healthy, and participate fully in society (Peacock, 2017). This approach reinforces Rawls' framework by focusing actual outcomes over abstract distributions, showing how inequality results in tangible disadvantage.

Together, Rawls and Sen provide a compelling common-ground between the demanding individualism of Singer and the structural critique of Pogge. Their theories support the existence of a moral duty to alleviate poverty, situating it mainly within institutions that encourage fairness and expand human capabilities. As Ülker Yükselbaba notes, these frameworks may face practical implementation challenges, questioning how fully ideal principles can guide real-world policy (Yükselbaba, p. 552).

While philosophical accounts provide normative frameworks for understanding moral obligations to mitigate poverty, empirical perspectives highlight how poverty is experienced in practice. Research by A. L. Roy and colleagues demonstrates that young people living in conditions of inequality often interpret their circumstances not as isolated misfortune, but as the result of broader structural injustices. Marginalized youth are embedded in “intersecting systems of oppression” that shape their access to opportunities across domains such as education, employment, and social mobility (Roy et al., 2019). This suggests that poverty is not merely a lack of resources, but a

reflection of systemic inequality. Importantly, the study discovers that many young people directly connect their personal experiences to wider social structures. For example, one participant writes that "people with a better education get better jobs and careers. Over here the education is not that great but maybe if they focus on giving us a chance in life we can actually do something in this world" (Roy et al., 2019). This draws attention between the relationship of inequality of opportunity and later life outcomes. Such approaches reinforce the arguments of John Rawls and Amartya Sen, who emphasize the importance of fair opportunity and capabilities in addressing poverty.

Furthermore, the realization that 37% of youth referenced their own experiences when discussing inequality illustrates the immediacy and personal reality of poverty (Roy et al., 2019). These accounts show substantial support to Thomas Pogge's claim that poverty is structurally produced rather than naturally occurring. Therefore, lived experience shows that moral obligations to relieve poverty must target systemic inequalities, not just individual aid.

In conclusion, the moral and structural obligations to alleviate poverty emerge from a complex interplay between ethical reasoning and institutional design. Philosophers like Peter Singer emphasize the acute moral duty of individuals to prevent suffering when they can do so at a minimum cost. Though Weidel points out that such demands may be a bit unrealistic and practically limiting (Singer, p. 239–247; Weidel, p. 946–947). Rawls and Sen further advance this perspective, demonstrating that fair institutions and expanded capabilities are essential for meaningful equality of opportunity (Yükselbaba, p. 541–552; Peacock, 2017). Thomas Pogge's critique of global institutions underscores the structural causes of poverty, revealing that

individual charity alone cannot rectify systemic inequities (Pogge, p. 405–406).

Complementing these theoretical frameworks, Brady and Roy et al. highlight the social, economic, and political contexts that shape poverty and individuals' capacity to respond (Brady, p. 155–164; Roy et al., p. 550–561). Together, these insights suggest that alleviating poverty requires coordinated action across moral, institutional, and structural dimensions, blending ethical imperatives with practical policy interventions.

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