



## Précis of *Responding to Global Poverty: Harm, Responsibility, and Agency*

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## Précis of *Responding to Global Poverty: Harm, Responsibility, and Agency*

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### ABSTRACT

This is a précis of my book with Gerhard Øverland, *Responding to Global Poverty: Harm, Responsibility, and Agency*.

### KEYWORDS

Harm; responsibility; poverty; global justice; doing and allowing harm; Peter singer

The extent and severity of global poverty are among the most profoundly disturbing aspects of our world. Statistics provide some sense of the scale of the problem. But they are relatively sterile, not least from being so often repeated, and fail to capture important features of the lived experience of those in severe poverty. We – relatively affluent people in the developed world – are accustomed to being able to change our circumstances for the better through hard work. We are able to guard against misfortune most of the time without much difficulty. Those in severe poverty, on the other hand, live in a very precarious state. Consider what it would be like for an unexpected illness or weather event to push you from just barely meeting your needs to not meeting them at all? What would it be like for your children or others close to you to die or experience debilitating illness from what (in our current state of affluence) causes only relatively short-term inconvenience? When we think about poverty, to the extent that we can, in terms of its implications for day-to-day experience, its prevalence and persistence seem all the more terrible. But it is one thing to recognize that severe poverty is a terrible problem and quite another to establish who, if anyone, is responsible for doing something about it and what they might sensibly do.

*Responding to Global Poverty: Harm, Responsibility, and Agency* is an exploration of the nature of the moral responsibilities of relatively affluent individuals in the developed world to address global poverty through a close examination of the arguments that philosophers have offered for our having these responsibilities. The first type of argument grounds such responsibilities in the ability to avert serious suffering by taking on some cost. We call responsibilities based on the mere ability to help *assistance-based*. The second type of argument seeks to ground such responsibilities in the fact that the affluent are contributing to such poverty. Because the affluent are contributing to poverty, they have a responsibility to take on the cost to address it. We call responsibilities based on contribution to harm *contribution-based*. To understand the significance of the distinction between these types of responsibilities, we need a clearer

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account of the distinction between contributing to and failing to prevent some outcome. Our book takes up this task through engagement with the literature on what philosophers have called the doing/allowing distinction. We argue that it is more fruitful to distinguish between doing, allowing, and enabling harm, and provide empirical evidence that this tripartite distinction is also intuitive to non-philosophers. The category of enabling becomes central to our analysis of contribution-based responsibilities to address poverty in later chapters of the book, most specifically in evaluating claims in popular media and by some philosophers that subsidies and tariffs are means by which the affluent are killing poor people abroad. There we also discuss some of the disturbing ways in which the affluent appear to enable harm through global trade, in particular by providing the means to local governments and private actors to do harm.

In our book, we criticise many of the arguments presented by those who seek to ground stringent responsibilities to the poor by invoking assistance-based and contribution-based responsibilities. Perhaps the most well-known proponents of each type of argument are Peter Singer – who has relied on appeal to assistance-based responsibilities – and Thomas Pogge – who has relied on appeal to contribution-based responsibilities. We argue that Singer’s arguments that individuals are ordinarily required to make very large sacrifices to help others in need are unpersuasive. We also argue that some of Pogge’s arguments employ an overly broad notion of what it means to contribute to harm, and elide a morally important distinction between doing harm to the poor and enabling harm. Many of the examples that Pogge and others have employed to show that the affluent have harmed the poor are more naturally described as cases in which the affluent exploit the poor. Reasons to respond to poverty based having exploited the poor are important, but we argue that they are distinct from and less stringent than those arising from having done or enabled harm.

Even if the arguments developed by Singer and Pogge are not fully successful; however, it does not, of course, follow that the affluent are meeting their responsibilities to the poor. Indeed, in our view, the vast majority of affluent people are not doing so. More specifically, we argue that while people are not ordinarily required (as Singer argues) to make large sacrifices to assist others in severe need, they are required to take on *moderate* costs to do so. And if the affluent fail consistently to meet this standard (and there is every reason to think that this is true of most affluent people), this fact can substantially increase the costs the affluent are required to bear to help fight poverty. Further, while we reject Pogge’s argument that the contributions of the affluent to poverty can typically be likened to the contributions of a negligent motorist to the injuries of a person he hits with his car, the affluent may indeed enable poverty abroad through policies and institutions for which they can be held responsible. While enabling harm is not morally equivalent to doing harm, it is not equivalent to allowing harm either; responsibilities based on enabling are typically much more stringent than those based on allowing harm.

We also focus in the book on what is, perhaps surprisingly, a neglected question in the literature on responsibilities to address poverty: What are the poor (or others acting on their behalf) permitted to do if the affluent fail in their responsibilities to them? The poor are agents and not merely patients; how far can they go in acting on their own behalf? We argue that if the affluent fail to discharge their responsibilities to the poor – whether assistance-based or contribution-based – they can make themselves liable to

harm, whether from the poor or others acting on their behalf, when this is proportionate and necessary to address the needs of the poor. We explain and reject various arguments that ordinary affluent people should be immune to force, or otherwise excused from their stringent contribution-based responsibilities: i.e. because they are (allegedly) innocent, only make smaller or insignificant contributions, or are ‘one among many.’ Our focus on enforceability, we hope, helps make vivid what is potentially at stake in failing to meet our responsibilities to the poor.

When agents who are committed to the idea of contribution-based responsibilities find themselves in situations in which it is unclear whether or not they have actually contributed to some harm, how should they conceive of their responsibilities? That is, what practical stance should they adopt when they are uncertain about whether or not they have contributed to some harm? This question, concerning responsibility in conditions of uncertainty, is one that needs to be engaged with by anyone who affirms such responsibilities and who wishes to act in a way that is informed by them. Moreover, this issue is of particular importance when it comes to assessing responsibilities to address global poverty. As we discuss throughout the book, claims regarding contribution to poverty are typically contested, and evidence of contribution to poverty and the magnitude of such contribution will often be indecisive.

This brings us to the question of the evidence needed to establish that someone contributes to global poverty. One might argue that a person lacks stringent responsibilities to address poverty unless their contribution to poverty can be proved ‘beyond a reasonable doubt.’ We argue at length, however, that we should not adopt such a demanding standard when assessing whether or not we are contributing to global poverty. The standards that are arguably appropriate for applying criminal and civil legal norms can be extremely implausible when applied to norms for determining ethical responsibilities. We argue that we ought often to *assume* responsibility for contributing to global poverty even when this claim is not supported by evidence that would satisfy evidential standards in courts of law. We argue that when the affluent consider their contribution-based responsibilities to the very poor in the face of evidential uncertainty; then, they have good reason to err in favour of over-compensating, given the significance of this moral risk relative to the risk of under-compensating.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.