

# The Nature of Poverty as Inhuman: Plausible but Illiberal?

Thaddeus Metz

University of Johannesburg

**ABSTRACT:** The present symposium, which I have organized on behalf of *the International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, is devoted to Hennie Lötter's *Poverty, Ethics and Justice*. The first three articles in the symposium attempt to show that Lötter's view on the eradication of poverty is inherently flawed, either in light of what a liberal state conceivably could do, or what respect for democracy requires, or what the environment can sustain. In this opening article, I draw out an interesting implication of Hennie Lötter's original and compelling conception of the nature of poverty as essentially inhuman. After motivating this view, I argue that it, like the capabilities approach and other views that invoke a conception of good and bad lives, is inconsistent with a standard understanding of a liberal account of the state's role, one that is independently supported and even readily accepted by liberal egalitarians. I argue that one must choose between a compelling conception of an impoverished life as not good or even bad and a liberal theory of the state's function, roughly by which conceptions of good and bad must not ground policy, where many redistributivist liberals have not recognized this inconsistency. Although there are activities similar to fighting poverty that a liberal state can undertake, I contend that it cannot, by definition, aim to eradicate poverty as such, in the way that Lötter and others plausibly conceive of it.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Hennie Lötter's *Poverty, Ethics and Justice*<sup>1</sup> is one of the very few books by a professional philosopher specifically to address poverty, as opposed to distributive injustice more broadly, at the domestic level. It merits attention for being a systematic exploration of what poverty is, why it is unjust, how to fight it, and related matters. In this article, part of a special issue devoted to Lötter's book, I expound and reflect critically on his original and compelling conception of the nature of poverty as essentially inhuman.

Specifically, after motivating this conception in the context of thought about poverty, I argue that it turns out to be inconsistent with a standard understanding of a liberal account of the state's proper role, one that is independently supported and even readily accepted by liberal egalitarians. I argue that one must choose

between a compelling conception of an impoverished life as bad, or as preventing a good life, and a liberal theory of the right function of the state as neutral among conceptions of the good and the bad. Although there are activities *similar to* fighting poverty that a liberal state can undertake, I contend that it cannot, by definition, aim to eradicate poverty as such, in the way that Lötter plausibly conceives of it.

In fact, I contend that the problem applies to the views of many self-described “liberals,” including Frank Michelman, Thomas Pogge, and Jeremy Waldron.<sup>2</sup> They deem poverty to be something that inhibits a good life, and something for the state to combat for that reason, but that position does not cohere well with an account of liberalism as abjuring the basing of state policy on judgments of which lives are good or not.

Others have suggested that there is a tension between liberalism and a policy of fighting poverty, but their accounts differ from mine. For example, some have argued that there are specific liberal rights, e.g., to be free from interference<sup>3</sup> or to familial privacy,<sup>4</sup> that would be violated (or at least infringed) by pursuing redistributive purposes. Others have contended that in practice a liberal state could not fight poverty effectively, perhaps because the purchasing power of the rich would price out the poor in respect of essential goods on a market,<sup>5</sup> or because the rich would use the courts to block substantial redistributions of wealth.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, I maintain that there is a logical contradiction between one influential and powerful conception of liberalism, understood as a theory of the state’s basic role, and the view that the state may or must fight poverty, where that is plausibly construed as a condition incompatible with living well.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, one reaction would be to modify the conception of liberalism to include reference to conceptions of the good, which William Galston once suggested long ago and which Martha Nussbaum would advocate, too. However, I argue that this is not easily done, that there is good reason for liberals to have focused on neutrality. In addition to considering how one might revise liberalism, I reflect on the merits and demerits of the other main option, namely, of revising Lötter’s and similar conceptions of poverty so as not to make essential reference to a bad or good quality of life. I conclude that this option, too, is unattractive, and hence that one must choose between a liberal state and a state that directly aims to fight poverty. I do not, at this stage, firmly indicate which view to drop.

## II. POVERTY AS INHUMAN

In this section, I spell out Lötter’s view that “poverty is an inhuman condition and must therefore be eradicated.”<sup>8</sup> I indicate what he means by calling poverty “inhuman,” and I also motivate his view, pointing out several respects in which it is promising relative to salient competing accounts.

For Lötter, there are two respects in which poverty is essentially inhuman, biologically and socially. Here is one of his definitive statements:

[P]eople are poor if they cannot obtain adequate economic resources, or do not have the requisite economic capacities to deal with resources fittingly to maintain physical health and engage in social activities distinctive of human beings in their respective societies.<sup>9</sup>

The “if” in this statement could fairly be replaced with an “if and only if” or a “just insofar as”; such would best capture Lötter’s views, I believe, and would in any event present a theory of poverty that is worth serious consideration.

Note that with this statement, Lötter makes it clear that not just any sort of inhuman condition, say, being tortured for the fun of it, is one of poverty. Instead, poverty is an inhuman condition when it comes to either a lack of certain economic resources or the inability to make use of them (and from hereon if I mention one of these, I mean to include the other). And it is, moreover, a matter of not being able to use economic goods and services in order to avoid one of two conditions, biological stunting, on the one hand, and social exclusion, on the other.

Lötter calls “extreme poverty” the inability to achieve and sustain biological wholeness, i.e., health, due to lack of economic capacity. Although he most often speaks of “physical” health, as in the quote above, and usually highlights risks of bodily injury and disease, this should not be understood to exclude mental health, which he does mention on occasion.<sup>10</sup> So, extreme poverty is a lack of economic resources threatening not merely death, malnutrition, and™ greater exposure and susceptibility to illnesses such as diarrhoea, malaria, tuberculosis, and the like, but also stress, alcoholism, depression, poor self-image, and related psychological conditions.

The second respect in which one can be poor, and “intermediately” so for Lötter, is being unable to participate in what Lötter above calls “social activities.” Such a condition of poverty means that people “cannot participate in any other activities regarded as indicative of being human in that society. . . . People who are intermediately poor are excluded from living lives expressing their humanity in socially defined ways.”<sup>11</sup> He gives examples of governance, education, rituals, communal events, entertainment, and talents.<sup>12</sup> Although his examples usually have an interpersonal dimension to them, there can be “socially defined” ways of living humanly that do not involve society, at least not directly. One of Lötter’s salient cases of such is interaction with the natural environment.<sup>13</sup> In addition, one could presumably count as poor insofar as one could not engage in certain activities that one might undertake on one’s own, such as being unable to: read, write, think, study, fantasize, paint, sculpt, draw, compose, meditate, collect, cultivate, and care for animals.

Note that, given the distinction between extreme and intermediate poverty, it may not always be clear how to classify some cases. For example, if poverty were to make an individual overly self-protective, tending to impose burdens unreasonably on others so as to avoid feeling inadequate or as though he is missing out, would that be an instance of extreme poverty, for being a form of mental illness, or intermediate poverty, for having difficulty expressing his humanity in ways that his society recognizes? Even though some instances might be hard to place, requiring a fuller account of mental and physical health in order to judge, Lötter’s biological versus social distinction is revealing, indicating sensible categories for theorists of poverty to employ. Or so I submit, among other appealing elements of his theory that I now sketch.<sup>14</sup>

One straightforward advantage of this conception of poverty is that it is obviously more compelling from a philosophical standpoint than are policy-oriented

conceptions such as being able to spend fewer than two dollars a day, once popular with the United Nations<sup>15</sup> and still used by the World Bank,<sup>16</sup> even when that is adjusted for various economic contexts and conceived in terms of purchasing power. Lötter's view is more basic and principled in that it enables one to judge the extent to which more practical measures, such as \$2/day, are appropriate.

Second, Lötter's theory usefully distinguishes poverty from another, related condition of inequality. It is pretty standard these days, including among political philosophers, to distinguish between absolute and relative poverty,<sup>17</sup> where the latter is a matter of those who are worst off in a particular society or those who are below the norm for it. Lötter rejects the latter concept as having to do with equality and not poverty, strictly speaking.<sup>18</sup> For him, it makes the most sense to contend that it is logically possible for there to be a society with no poverty but great inequality. I believe that this way of cutting up the issues is reasonable both descriptively and morally, even if it is true that often social inequality (even the mere perception of it) reliably *causes* poverty, properly conceived.<sup>19</sup> That is not to say that Lötter does not find serious problems with inequality, for he does.<sup>20</sup> It is just that these problems are in themselves (apart from what they might cause with regard to biological stunting and social exclusion) different from ones of poverty, in his view.

Third, Lötter's theory does a strong job of capturing the intuition that there are degrees of poverty, with some types worse than others. Plausibly, according to Lötter, poverty is more severe, viz., is "extreme," when it threatens a person's life or liveliness (health), roughly when it affects a person's internal condition, and not merely one's ability to engage in certain outward behavior, characteristically with others or at least as approved by others.

Fourth, his view is also on the face of it more attractive than common Kantian and utilitarian conceptions. For the Kantian, according to whom a person's dignity inheres in her ability to make reasoned or autonomous choices, one is poor, or poverty is unjust, insofar as one's freedom to make a wide array of decisions is limited.<sup>21</sup> Poverty is a lack of access to general-purpose means or what are often called "resources" with which one could make a variety of choices. However, it is plausible to think, with Lötter, that a fairly specific *content* of the choices is relevant to determining whether a person is poor or not, or whether it is a moral problem. It is reasonable to maintain that one is poor, or objectionably so, insofar as one cannot choose *certain* items, viz., goods that would enable one to sustain one's health and to participate in certain projects.

Similar remarks go for the preference-satisfaction version of utilitarianism that tends to be favored by most economists and some philosophers. Although Peter Singer defines absolute poverty in terms of the inability to meet needs,<sup>22</sup> it is not clear that he coherently can, given his adherence to preference utilitarianism. Or, more carefully, he must think of the *wrongness* of poverty in terms of general preference dissatisfaction, but poverty is implausibly the inability to satisfy just any preferences, but rather ones with certain objects, perhaps as concern basic needs. While there are of course replies to be made on behalf of these theories, some of which are addressed below, my present point is that Lötter's easily avoids one straightforward and powerful objection to them.

Fifth, although Lötter ultimately maintains that poverty is morally objectionable, he also, in the first instance, appears to provide a morally neutral conception of it, one that, say, social scientists could use with profit, or philosophers could use when debating about whether poverty is indeed unjust.<sup>23</sup> That is, Lötter's view naturally grounds certain moral judgments without *intrinsically* building them into his basic conception of poverty, which seems appropriate. For one, it is not logically contradictory to think of poverty in merely scientific terms, as per a sociologist. For another, there is no conceptual confusion to reflect philosophically on poverty without committing oneself to any moral claims about it; a libertarian who denies that the state may fight poverty via redistribution probably is incorrect, but not abusing language, when he makes such a statement. An inherently moralized conception of poverty, however, would implausibly entail that the sociologist and the libertarian fail to grasp the meaning of the word "poverty," which is good reason to reject moralized conceptions of poverty, such as the "ethical poverty line"<sup>24</sup> and the view that poverty "is, by definition, morally wrong."<sup>25</sup>

Sixth, when it comes to moral judgment, Lötter's conception of poverty naturally *grounds* criticisms of it as unjust, even if it does not *include* them by definition. Sometimes Lötter suggests that the inhumanity of poverty is degrading, while other time he notes that it is harmful. Despite the distance from standard Kantian and utilitarian accounts, Lötter's view remains compatible with different fundamental ethical appraisals of the state and of others in a society.

For all these reasons, Lötter's analysis of the essence of poverty is *prima facie* plausible and deserves consideration from the field. While it is powerful in relation to the literature on poverty, it is to be flatly rejected in light of the standard conception of liberalism. In the next two sections, I aim to show how the two are logically incompatible and how this is a problem for a wide array of redistributivist liberals.

### III. THE STANDARD CONCEPTION OF LIBERALISM<sup>26</sup>

Liberalism as construed here is a theory about the proper functions or aims of government. Specifically, according to what I take to be the standard, or particularly well motivated and influential, conception of liberalism, the only reason to have a state is to secure (innocent) people's equal rights to live as they please. According to this view, the sole basic end that the state ought to pursue is the protection of people's ability to act according to their own conceptions of the good and bad (while abiding by a conception of the right that affords others the equal ability to do so).

Sometimes the term "liberalism" is defined to include due process rights, e.g., to a trial and to be free from torture or the death penalty. However, I do not define the term this way. I understand liberalism to be a theory about the ends the state fundamentally should seek to realize, not an account of how the state ought to go about prosecuting those who are suspected of having frustrated its ends. There are several reasons for taking this purpose-based account of liberalism to be the standard one.

First, it easily accounts for the kinds of policies that a liberal intuitively accepts and those that s/he rejects. What I am calling the "standard" conception of

liberalism entails that a state should criminalize actions such as murder, rape, kidnapping, and theft, since they prevent others from living as they see fit. And it also entails that a state should not criminalize gay sex, blasphemy, and drug use, since these actions can be performed in ways that do not prevent others from living as they see fit.

This analysis of liberalism also entails commonsensical views about the way that a liberal state ought to spend tax money, use public property, and enact facilitative law. For instance, it would be illiberal for a state to donate taxes to the Catholic Church, to make copies of the *Qur'an* freely available, and to facilitate marriage only among heterosexuals. A good explanation of these facts is that a liberal state is one the fundamental purpose of which is merely to protect people's equal rights to choose their own ways of life.

Second, this account of liberalism entails weaker and more limited principles often associated with liberalism. For instance, sometimes liberalism is understood to be the view that the state may not promote a conception of the good, or that the state must be neutral with regard to different ways of life, or that the state may not enforce ends that may reasonably be rejected. The claim that the state's sole purpose should be to protect people's equal rights to live as they see fit entails these principles, while these principles on their own are incomplete for being merely negative; they do not provide a positive account of what the state ought to be doing with its criminal laws, tax money, public property, and facilitative law.

Third, this analysis of liberalism suggests plausible versions of rival accounts of the state's proper aim. By analogy with the present account of liberalism, paternalism would be the view that one proper purpose of the state is to keep people from harming (or to encourage them to help) themselves, while moralism would be the view that the government may rightly aim to discourage vice (or to promote virtue) in people's lives.

Fourth, this construal of liberalism usefully leaves open whether people's rights to live as they see fit are merely negative or are also positive. Liberals are well-known for being split among libertarians, who hold that the state must merely prevent interference in the lives of citizens, and egalitarians (or redistributivists), who think that the state may also use force to make wealthier citizens help others in some way who are worse off.

Fifth, this definition of "liberalism" aptly leaves open the philosophical underpinning of the view. Sometimes the term is defined as the view that the state ought to treat citizens as free and equal persons, but that presumes that some kind of Kantianism is inherent to liberalism, thereby oddly excluding the logical possibility of, e.g., John Stuart Mill's utilitarian defense of liberalism. In addition, this Kantian definition a priori rules out the possibility of a conservative state treating citizens as free and equal, something that even Ronald Dworkin believes is logically possible (albeit substantively false).<sup>27</sup>

Sixth, and finally, liberalism so understood fits with what prominent self-described liberals and commentators on them have said about its essential nature. I, of course, cannot canvass a wide array of statements here, but do present the following choice quotes:

[T]he sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection. (Mill)<sup>28</sup>

The night-watchman state of classical liberal theory [is] limited to the functions of protecting all its citizens against violence, theft and fraud, and to the enforcement of contracts. (Nozick)<sup>29</sup>

[T]he state and all its acts are justified only insofar as they seek to secure the rights of people to the greatest degree possible. (Nino)<sup>30</sup>

[T]he most reasonable political conception of justice for a democratic regime will be, broadly speaking, liberal. That means that it protects the familiar basic rights and assigns them a special priority. (Rawls)<sup>31</sup>

In the liberal project, as currently defined by liberal theorists, the political community is a bare framework within which autonomous choices can be made. We are not to seek, through politics and government, the kind of community that will best redeem the promise of human fellowship or most closely approximate the potential for human growth. (Selznick)<sup>32</sup>

That a liberal state has the sole end of protecting rights is the dominant theme.

Below, I address some additional rivals to this conception of liberalism, refutation of which will provide still more evidence in support of my claim that the present rendition of liberalism is indeed the standard one. Now I aim to show that this understanding of liberalism is incompatible with a policy of fighting poverty, as Lötter and even many liberals themselves understand it.

#### IV. WHY A LIBERAL STATE CANNOT FIGHT POVERTY

Here is the problem, in a nutshell. Impoverished lives are unjust because they are bad or prevent people from living well, but a liberal state may not act so as to enable people to live well, but instead must act solely to protect their ability to choose whatever way of life they would like. I first articulate the contradiction in the context of Lötter's conception of poverty before generalizing the argument to similar conceptions. I systematically consider how the liberal egalitarian might aim to resolve the problem only in the following section.

Recall Lötter's powerful conception of poverty. According to him, poverty is an inhuman way of life caused by a lack of economic resources (or inability to use them), where that can be manifest either by stunting human nature in the sense of people being unable to meet their biological needs (extreme poverty), or by preventing people from engaging in activities that their society deems expressive of humanity (intermediate poverty). "People suffering from poverty have inadequate resources to provide for their basic needs of food, clothing, shelter and self-development. To ignore their interest in securing these things in their quest to enable their physical survival as human beings and to strive for flourishing lives, while others in society have an abundance of such means, violates the principle of the equal consideration of each citizen's interests."<sup>33</sup> My claim is that fulfilling this interest would be illiberal.

The initial, albeit surface, way to see the incompatibility of this view of poverty with liberalism lies in the terms "inhuman," "self-development," and "flourishing." These are all naturally construed as evaluative (even if not moralized) terms,

ones connoting a way of life that is bad or good, that is either ill-fitting or apt for human nature.<sup>34</sup> However, a liberal state is one that seeks merely to protect people's right to choose their own ways of life, and does not act in light of any particular conception of good or bad lives.

One might try to avoid the problem by suggesting a revision to Lötter's view, viz., dropping talk of poverty as "inhuman" or a failure to "flourish" and instead advocating a purely descriptive account. However, reference to biological needs as well as activities that people's society deems expressive of humanity continue to be beyond the remit of a state that seeks merely to protect people's ability to choose their own ways of life.

That point is clearest when it comes to the latter element, central to intermediate poverty for Lötter. For society to consider certain ways of life to be expressive of humanity is for it to advocate certain conceptions of the good, on which a state by definition cannot act if it is to be liberal.

Furthermore, I maintain that the point applies even to extreme poverty construed as an inability to meet biological needs or as physical and psychological illness. Part of the worry is that needs, illness, and, correspondingly, health are plausibly understood to be evaluative concepts (that being the most natural way to avoid counterexamples to statistical conceptions of them, e.g., homosexuality).

And even if health were not inherently something good, promoting it would *not* be equivalent to enabling people to choose their own ways of life. One might of course suspect that it would be; one cannot make a wide array of choices if one has stage four lung cancer, for example. The thought that illness and injury prevent one from choosing one's own life drove a number of Rawlsians long ago to urge the field to consider health to be a primary good.<sup>35</sup> However, health is implausibly reduced to a state that facilitates choosing an array of courses of action, even subject to allowing others to do the same.

To see this point, consider those who have a fear of intimacy, a sexual dysfunction, or an impediment to pregnancy. They find it difficult to be emotionally close, to orgasm, or to get pregnant, but they may well be able to adopt quite a number of other ends, even when in the context of interpersonal, romantic relationships.

Or reflect on mild itchiness or rashes that are a result of allergies. They need not impair one's ability to respect others' rights or to exercise one's own.

Or think about the loss of some toes or teeth. One could still adopt many ways of life with these forms of ill-health. And even if a given person could not adopt her favored way of life with them, it would at best follow that only her ill-health in these respects should be helped by a liberal state, and not that of others.

These kinds of examples show that a liberal state may not seek to promote health or satisfy needs as such, but merely insofar as doing so is expected to bear on people's ability to choose their own ways of life. However, by Lötter's conception of poverty, it is the former that counts.

The inconsistency plagues a number of redistributivists who describe themselves as "liberals." They, too, conceive of poverty as something incompatible with living well, and to be fought at least in part for that reason, but do not recognize that a state insofar as it is liberal cannot act for the sake of enabling people to live well.

[T]he actions that are being closed off to the homeless are . . . actions basic to the sustenance of a decent or healthy life. (Waldron)<sup>36</sup>

[I]n analysing social justice, there is a strong case for judging individual advantage in terms of the capabilities a person has, that is, the substantive freedoms he and she enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value. In this perspective, poverty must be seen as the deprivation of basic capabilities rather than merely as lowness of incomes. (Sen)<sup>37</sup>

We are physical beings who need access to safe food and water, clothing, shelter, and basic medical care in order to live well—indeed, in order to live at all. People living in severe poverty lack secure access to sufficient quantities of these basic necessities. (Pogge)<sup>38</sup>

Poverty involves heterogeneous failures of opportunity, which are not always well correlated with income. . . . The purpose of global development, like the purpose of a good domestic national policy, is to enable people to live full and creative lives. (Nussbaum)<sup>39</sup>

You might be convinced that each one of us (who can afford to do so) stands under strict moral obligation to do *something* to alleviate the grave material distress of others in our neighborhood, or perhaps of others wherever in the world we find them in distress. The ground of this moral obligation, you might think, is simply shared humanity, along with facts of suffering and need that we cannot help but notice. How you measure “need” might depend on further details about how you conceive the human condition and the human good. (Michelman)<sup>40</sup>

All the above theorists are ones who would call themselves “liberals,” and yet the way that they conceive poverty, and suggest the reasons we have for fighting poverty, appeal to non-liberal concepts, such as decency, health, a life there is reason to value, living well, living fully and creatively, meeting needs, or according with the human good. The latter are straightforwardly understood in terms of a certain conception of the good, something for the sake of which a state must not act if it is to be liberal. A liberal state, as standardly understood, may act only to secure people’s equal rights to live as they see fit, i.e., according to their own conception of the good, not one advocated by the state.

Another way to apprehend the incompatibility is through the lens of what redistributivist liberals characteristically seek to distribute. The default position is that a just state ought to distribute only *general-purpose means*, that is, goods that would be useful for achieving a *wide variety of ends*. Consider Rawls’s social primary goods, Bruce Ackermann’s *mana*, and Ronald Dworkin’s *resources*, which include things such as food/water, bodily functioning, freedoms from interference, the absence of pain, money, education, and self-esteem. As Dworkin contends,

[J]ustice of an economic distribution depends on its allocation of resources rather than of welfare or well-being. Ethical liberals cannot accept any goal of justice defined in the latter terms . . . because government would then usurp the most important part of the challenge people face in leading a life, which is identifying life’s value for themselves.<sup>41</sup>

But this means that ethical liberals cannot fight poverty as such, when poverty is construed as an economic inability to live well, e.g., to live humanly.

## V. RESPONDING TO THE INCONSISTENCY

As noted above, there are two key ways to respond to the claim that the standard conception of liberalism is inconsistent with a conception of poverty as inhuman or otherwise constitutive of a bad (or not so good) life for human beings. First, one might argue that I have misconstrued the essence of liberalism, and that some other conception of it is independently motivated and can cohere with poverty as Lötter and others understand it. Second, one might argue that the latter understanding of poverty is implausible, and that some other interpretation of it is consistent with what I have called the “standard” interpretation of liberalism.

Before exploring these two options, both of which presume there is an inconsistency, I consider the response that there in fact is not. Some will be tempted to suggest that a liberal state, as I have defined it, can fight poverty, as Lötter has defined it, since the distribution of general-purpose means could be used by someone to lift himself out of poverty. After all, if the the means are truly general-purpose, then one purpose could be to avoid living an inhuman life, one might point out.

However, this response is unsatisfactory, for two reasons. First, it could just as well be said of such a state that it is fighting an inability to smoke cigarettes, to gamble money away at slot machines, or to torture kittens. A state is not plausibly deemed to be fighting poverty if it provides means to do so that are equally means to achieve any number of purposes beyond living well.

A state that fights poverty is instead one that provides means tailored to the specific purpose of fighting poverty. Supposing, at this stage of the dialectic, that poverty is (in part) an inability to live well and is to be fought for that reason, then a state fighting poverty would provide means particularly useful for living well, not for achieving just any purpose. Such a state would plausibly provide education, healthcare, parks/wilderness, and couples counseling, for just a few examples, and not so much money that could be used to buy either those things or many other, radically different kinds of things instead.

Second, it could be that distributing only general-purpose means would in fact retard the state’s ability to fight poverty, when construed as an inability to live well because of economic conditions. This sort of claim has been made by Aristotelians, Marxists, and communitarians in respect of Rawls for some time.<sup>42</sup> Even though a liberal state is neutral in its intent, it foreseeably inhibits people’s ability to live according to certain conceptions of the good, ones that plausibly inform a view of what counts as an impoverished life.

For example, it might be that a focus on money tends to: undermine relationships of identity and solidarity; prompt people to attend to their status, with the winners consuming conspicuously and the losers feeling as though they are missing out; lead people to work too long at meaningless jobs, being too exhausted afterwards to do anything meaningful outside of work, too; encourage people to take on debt and suffer anxiety as a result, often called “*affluenza*”; or “produce excessive competitiveness, or excessive focus on technical and managerial tasks, distracting people from social interaction, from the arts, from learning and reflecting.”<sup>43</sup> Consider, too, as some evidence suggests,<sup>44</sup> that when individuals have substantial numbers of options, they become more indecisive, failing to pick any

of them. The deep point is that, even if these correlations between money and the inability to live well turned out to be false, the need to undertake empirical work in order to ascertain that entails that a state fighting a war against poverty by distributing general-purpose means would be doing so merely by proxy.

Supposing, then, that a state operating according to the standard conception of liberalism cannot directly fight poverty, how might the liberal redistributivist respond to this problem? One option is to question whether my construal of liberalism is indeed standard. Perhaps some other understanding of liberalism is comparably motivated and is consistent with an anti-poverty state.

For a first suggestion, some might maintain that liberalism is essentially the view that the state may not force anyone to live according to a conception of the good (or forcibly prevent anyone from living according to a conception of the bad). Refraining from using force so as to foster a particular way of life does not require refraining from making a particular way of life available as an option, so the response goes. Hence, while it would be illiberal to punish people for not reading the Bible, it would not be illiberal to provide resources that are particularly useful for being healthy, educated, or able to sustain a loving relationship.

The most important problem with this suggestion is that it fails to capture liberalism adequately.<sup>45</sup> If a liberal state is essentially merely one that does not coerce people into living by a certain way of life, but that may make certain ways of life available as options, then it would not be illiberal for a state to make free copies of the Bible available and to pay for Sunday School attendance, while not doing so for other religions or secular worldviews. However, that is enormously counterintuitive.

Here is another way one might suggest understanding liberalism in a way that would permit, even require, anti-poverty policies. Perhaps instead of the ability to choose one's own conception of the good, liberal rights are best understood as capabilities to choose objectively correct conceptions of the good. William Galston was one of the first to suggest this understanding of liberalism:

[T]he appropriate measure of liberal social policy is not the extent to which the human good is realized but, rather, the opportunity it affords individuals to strive and exercise that good. . . . A liberal polity may be viewed as a cooperative endeavor to create and sustain circumstances within which individuals may pursue—and to the greatest possible extent achieve—their good.<sup>46</sup>

And Nussbaum tends to follow suit in recent work.<sup>47</sup>

One serious concern about this interpretation of liberalism, however, is whether it gives liberty sufficient recognition. From the present perspective, liberty is to be upheld merely as a means to the end of living well. Or, if liberty is a final good or to be treated as an end in itself, it is so only insofar as it facilitates the end of living well (cf. the literature on finally good extrinsic values). However, a standard liberal understanding of freedom is that it merits protection beyond simply enabling one to achieve objective goods. Although Galston's and Nussbaum's conception of liberalism rules out a state that goes out of its way to enable people to whistle *Yankee Doodle Dandy* while standing on their head,<sup>48</sup> it unfortunately has difficulty accounting for the liberal intuition that people should be legally permitted to do so. In the liberal tradition, freedom is something to prize not merely insofar as it

fosters a good life; it is instead considered important for people to have the freedom to make mistakes, one of which is wasting their time. Conceiving of liberal rights in terms of the ability to live as one sees fit captures that judgment much better than doing so in terms of the ability to live well.

I close by considering the last option available to those who coherently wish to describe themselves as “anti-poverty liberals.” If I am correct that what I have called the “standard” conception of liberalism deserves that label, and that it is inconsistent with Lötter’s and related theories of poverty that include conceptions of the bad/good, then all that remains is to consider whether a different, neutral understanding of poverty is on the cards. Ideal, of course, would be a theory of poverty as a lack of general-purpose means. If to be poor were just to lack resources useful for achieving a wide array of ends, then liberalism, standardly construed, would obviously be consistent with anti-poverty programs.

There are three damning problems with this reply. One quickly follows from discussion earlier in this section about the proposal that a state that distributed general-purpose means would be well construed as one “fighting poverty.” Although at that point in the dialectic the liberal’s suggestion was not that poverty *just is* to lack such means, my arguments designed to show that distributing such means is *not strongly correlated* with fighting poverty imply that poverty is not one and the same thing as lacking them.

Second, points familiar from the capabilities literature tell against a conception of poverty as simply a lack of income or even means as Rawls, Dworkin, and other liberals understand them. Nussbaum and Sen have forcefully argued that, in order to know whether people are out of poverty, one cannot look simply at the amount of general-purpose means they have, but whether those means are enough (can be “converted,” in the jargon) to change their quality of life.

Third, and finally for now, conceiving of poverty as a lack of general-purpose means fails to capture the intuition that Lötter and others quoted above have about why a state should fight poverty. The glaring reason people do not want to be poor is that they do not want to live bad lives! Hennie Lötter has powerfully argued that the sort of bad life at stake with poverty is an inhuman one. It appears that if he is correct, or close to the mark, and if one believes that the state may and must fight poverty, then one must forsake a liberal conception of the state’s proper function.<sup>49</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. Hennie Lötter, *Poverty, Ethics and Justice* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013).
2. Although there are passages suggesting sympathy toward liberalism in Lötter’s book (188, 212), there are others, more dominant, that make clear reference to non-liberal ends (228–32, 238–48).
3. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1974).
4. James Fishkin, *Justice, Equal Opportunity, and the Family* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

5. Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1983), 91.

6. Lungisile Ntsebeza, "Land Redistribution in South Africa: The Property Clause Revisited," in *The Land Question in South Africa*, ed. Lungisile Ntsebeza and Ruth Hall (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2007), 107–31 at 120–4.

7. I first made this point briefly in Thaddeus Metz, "The Desirability of a Property Clause: Michelman's Defence of Constitutional Liberalism," *Stellenbosch Law Review* 24 (2013): 312–28 at 327.

8. Lötter, *Poverty, Ethics and Justice*, 160.

9. *Ibid.*, 151.

10. *Ibid.*, 56, 64–5.

11. *Ibid.*, 161–2. See also 38, 52, 59–60, 272, 273.

12. *Ibid.*, 36. See also 111, 151, 286.

13. *Ibid.*, 83–90.

14. I have made some of the following points in Thaddeus Metz, "The Nature of Poverty as an Inhuman Condition," *Res Publica* doi:10.1007/s11158-016-9318-1.

15. United Nations Millenium Project, "Fast Facts: The Faces of Poverty," (2006), [http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/resources/fastfacts\\_e.htm](http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/resources/fastfacts_e.htm).

16. World Bank, "Poverty Headcount Ratio at \$2 a Day (PPP)," (2014), <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.2DAY>, and "Poverty Overview," (2014), <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview>.

17. E.g., Peter Singer, "Rich and Poor," in his *Practical Ethics*, 2nd edn. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 218–46 at 218; and A. C. Grayling, "What is Poverty?" *Prospect Magazine* (19 November 2013), <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/a-c-grayling-what-is-poverty/>.

18. For additional critics of the concept of relative poverty, see Peter Townsend, "What Is Poverty? An Historical Perspective," in *Poverty in Focus*, ed. International Poverty Centre (Brasilia: United Nations Development Programme, 2006), 5–6; and Beverley Shaw, "Poverty: Absolute or Relative?" *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 5 (2008): 27–36.

19. E.g., Joseph Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), and *The Great Divide* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015).

20. Lötter, *Poverty, Ethics and Justice*, 49–55.

21. E.g., John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). I address these Kantian conceptions of poverty in more depth below.

22. Singer, "Rich and Poor," 220.

23. However, there are other passages in Lötter's book that do suggest an inherently moralized conception of poverty. See *Poverty, Ethics and Justice*, 23, 270–1.

24. Peter Edward, "The Ethical Poverty Line: A Moral Definition of Absolute Poverty," in *Poverty in Focus*, ed. International Poverty Centre (Brasilia: United Nations Development Programme, 2006), 14–6.

25. Gunter Graf and Gottfried Schweiger, "The Philosophical Evaluation of Poverty," *Salzburger Beiträge zur Sozialethik* 3 (2013): 1–21 at 7.

26. The following analysis draws on Thaddeus Metz, "How to Reconcile Liberal Politics with Retributive Punishment," *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 27 (2007): 683–705 at 685–7.

27. Ronald Dworkin, "Liberalism," repr. in his *A Matter of Principle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 181–204.
28. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Repr. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1978), 9.
29. Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 26.
30. C. S. Nino, "Does Consent Override Proportionality?" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 15 (1986): 183–7 at 183.
31. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 156–7.
32. Philip Selznick, "Foundations of Communitarian Liberalism," in *The Essential Communitarian Reader*, ed. Amitai Etzioni (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998), 3–13 at 12.
33. Lötter, *Poverty, Ethics and Justice*, 112.
34. Cf. *ibid.*, 48, 161.
35. E.g., Thomas Pogge, *Realizing Rawls* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).
36. Jeremy Waldron, "Homelessness and the Issue of Freedom," repr. in his *Liberal Rights* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 309–38 at 333.
37. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1999), 87.
38. Thomas Pogge, "Severe Poverty as a Human Rights Violation," (2003), 1, [http://portal.unesco.org/shs/en/files/4363/10980840881Pogge\\_29\\_August.pdf](http://portal.unesco.org/shs/en/files/4363/10980840881Pogge_29_August.pdf); Pogge+29+August.pdf.
39. Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 185.
40. Frank Michelman, "Poverty in Liberalism," *Drake Law Review* 60 (2012): 1001–21 at 1006, 1007.
41. Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 154, 277.
42. E.g., Adina Schwartz, "Moral Neutrality and Primary Goods," *Ethics* 83 (1973): 294–307.
43. Martha Nussbaum, "Aristotelian Social Democracy," in *Liberalism and the Good*, ed. R. Bruce Douglass et al. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 203–52 at 211.
44. Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).
45. Another problem is that some, the rich, would still be coerced for the sake of promoting a conception of the good, which I have argued remains illiberal in Thaddeus Metz, "Respect for Persons and Perfectionist Politics," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 30 (2001): 417–42.
46. William Galston, "Liberal Goods," repr. in his *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues, and Diversity in the Liberal State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 165–90 at 178, 183.
47. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*.
48. As per *ibid.*, 28, 32.
49. For comments on part of this article, I thank participants in a workshop devoted to Hennie Lötter's *Poverty, Ethics and Justice* held at the University of Johannesburg in November 2013, especially Gillian Brock, Daryl Glaser, Hennie Lötter, Darrel Moellendorf, and Brian Penrose. This work is based on research supported by the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa, and I acknowledge that the opinions, findings and conclusions expressed in this NRF supported publication are those of the author, and that the NRF accepts no liability whatsoever in this regard.