



# Eradicating Poverty: The Mission, Vision and Conviction

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## Abstract

Eradicating poverty is one of the prime goals included in the Sustainable Development Goals set by the United Nations in its Post-2015 Development Agenda. Clearly, this is a mission set for the world to achieve but do humans have a moral obligation to fulfill it? In other words, is there a moral obligation on the part of the affluent of the world to help the needy poor? Drawing on the relation between a moral obligation and a moral right, one view is that if there is a moral obligation to help the needy poor of the world, then we can say that those afflicted by severe poverty have a moral right (human right) to be free from poverty. But being an example of a socioeconomic right, it is writ with problems leading some philosophers to doubt that there is such a right. On the other hand, many attempts have been made to justify such a right. The paper looks at some attempts that have been made to justify the existence of such a right on the metaethical principles of justice, humanity and the concepts of karma and dharmic duty. It further delves into the nature of the moral obligation to eradicate poverty where this philosophical exercise provides the vision and the insight into the extent and scope of the mission. Lastly, the paper suggests how in view of the complex theoretical issues involved, one can attempt to generate the conviction that there is a human moral obligation to eradicate poverty.

**Keywords** Poverty · Human rights · Human moral obligations · Justice · Humanity · Positive and negative duties

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## Introduction

The United Nations Open Working Group, on the mandate of the Outcome Document (*The Future We Want*) of the Rio+20 UNCSA (United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development), set a list of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs or the Post-2015 Development Agenda) of which the eradication of world poverty is a prime goal.<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly, this is a noble though ambitious goal that has many socio-economic and geopolitical facets to it, but one may wonder what it would take for it to become more than a well-intended “moral decision” into a “moral mission” which will help remove the glaring socioeconomic discrepancies in some societies like, for example, India. The larger aim of this paper is, therefore, concerned with trying to find out what philosophical reasoning will provide the insight or vision which would eventually lead to conviction and appropriate actions, thereby translating this “decision” into a “mission” of the global society. For that reason, the thrust of the paper is more theoretical than practical notwithstanding the fact that ultimately it is the real actions taken to eradicate poverty that will count.

There is an aspect of global poverty<sup>2</sup> which has intrigued philosophers and many have engaged in several theoretical discussions on the question whether there is some kind of “moral obligation” on the part of the affluent class to help the needy poor of the world. Again, if there is such a moral obligation what is its nature, and is it incumbent on the “haves” *simply* because the “have-nots” *have* (if nothing else) a right to be free from poverty (RFP)? Another ramification of the question is whether this moral obligation to help the poor also extends to the “distant stranger,” someone who is separated from the helping agent (including governments of affluent countries) by distance and/or affections. Most people would agree that we should help the poor if we are in a position to help without causing undue harm to ourselves, but take this “should” in a weak sense either as “supererogatory” or at best as an “imperfect duty” (*a la* Kant), of charity, humanity or solidarity where who gets the aid and to what extent is left to the discretion of the aid giving agent and where no moral guilt or blame accrues if the agent fails to fulfill this duty. In other words, one may argue that it is good to help, but the poor have no *right* to be helped. In this sense, the moral obligation or duty to help the poor is not one which co-relates with a moral right, the right to be free from poverty or the right to subsistence. Like Kant’s imperfect duty to animals, one could argue that there is only an imperfect duty to aid the poor for this makes for better humanitarian relations among people. Some other philosophers, however, have argued for such a right on various grounds and have

<sup>1</sup> <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg1>.

<sup>2</sup> I agree with Thomas Pogge who states that an exact definition of poverty is less crucial for philosophical discussions (Thomas Pogge 2007: 2). This paper is about philosophical concerns around the phenomenon of poverty. The discussion which follows rests on an understanding of poverty which itself is a contentious issue since the phenomenon of poverty is relative. However, there is undoubtedly a sense that everybody has of what basic sustenance requires and anybody deprived of that is to be counted as living in abject poverty. It is this sense of poverty that is referred to in the paper notwithstanding the relative nature of poverty. Also, it is in this sense that one can possibly talk of eradicating poverty. Poverty in the relative sense cannot be eradicated though it could be reduced.

concluded that there is a moral obligation to help the poor because they have a moral right to be assisted in having the basic necessities of life, just as they have the right to a life of dignity, right to freedom of speech and movement, etc. Tom Campbell, in his “Poverty as a Violation of Human Rights: Inhumanity or Injustice?”, has aptly remarked that “[a]pproaching poverty through the prism of human rights is to lift it from the status of a social problem to that of a moral catastrophe” (Campbell 2007: 56). Thus, the proposal to present poverty as a violation of human rights sets a “new paradigm” in the fight against poverty.

Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)<sup>3</sup> postulates such a right, it is considered to be a right which is only “aspirational” in nature and not “obligatory.” There are many practical questions which arise with respect to the nature of such a right. Being an instance of a socioeconomic right, the RFP is faced with the difficulties of enforceability, claimability and implementability. Specifically, the difficulties pertain to identifying the bearers of the stringent and perfect duties and the extent or scope of the duties (positive and/or negative duties) correlated with such a right. Who should bear the moral obligation of assisting the poor? Is it the responsibility of the state alone or everyone, and do these duties extend to all, even the distant, unknown needy people of the world? These are some questions which do not have clear answers. Also, there are problems and issues pertaining to the institutional implementation of such a claim. This explains why the right has always been considered to be aspirational in character.

The question is—can we argue for the RFP from the point of view of philosophy and ethics in a way where it is no longer a well-intentioned goal; where eradication of poverty is not merely a “goal” but a “morally motivated mission”? The paper sets to address these questions by first examining the views of philosophers who hold that freedom from abject poverty is a basic right and justify that right on the basis of certain metaethical principles. They have asked the question—what is wrong, unfair and unjust about severe poverty which demands its eradication? The answer could lie in what is caused by poverty or in what causes poverty. Alan Gewirth (2007) and Amartya Sen (2000) are of the opinion that it is what poverty causes which is unfair, unjust and unequal. Poverty causes the loss of moral agency and capability and that is what makes it wrong. Thomas Pogge, on the other hand, thinks that the causes of poverty make it an intolerable phenomenon. He is of the opinion that poverty is the net result of unfair socioeconomic relations among nations. He argues that as the poor are poor, in part, because of what the rich have done, it is obligatory on the part of the affluent and rich to help the poor. While Alan Gewirth, Amartya Sen and Thomas Pogge have sought to justify the RFP on the basis of the principle of justice, Tom Campbell (2007) attempts to do the same on the basis of the principle of humanity. He is of the opinion that poverty needs to be alleviated because of its disastrous effects on humanity. There is also the approach which attributes suffering caused by poverty, as well as relief from it, to transcendental causes (like past

<sup>3</sup> The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) postulates such a right in Article 25: “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family including food, clothing, housing and medical care.”

karma) without, at the same time, undermining the worldly efforts to eradicate it. The paper also discusses the view of Lichtenberg (2014) who delves into the moral psychology of “giving” to address the issue of assistance to the needy. She believes that the “rights language” should be avoided in this context and that the focus should be more on ways and means of motivating individuals as members of collectives to help the desperately needy people of the world.

## The Right to be Free from Poverty: The Causal Approach

Alan Gewirth (2007) has construed the moral obligation to help the poor as an obligation against the universal moral right to be free from poverty. He says, “Moral rights impose correlative duties; not imperfect duties of charity, humanity or solidarity, but perfect, stringent, and in principle enforceable duties of justice” (Gewirth 2007: 219). He attempts to justify the RFP based on a principle of justice that is construed both in its formal and substantive aspect where the former demands that equals be treated equally and unequals unequally, whereas the latter consists in rendering to each person what is due to her.

Gewirth takes the RFP as a human right which has its justification in the very same argument which justifies the existence of human rights as such. He begins by stating that it is the concept of action that underlies and justifies the invocation of rights. Rights are rights to do something which eventually end up being rights to be in a certain state or become something/someone. He asserts that the context of all moralities is action: voluntary and purposeful action. Actions are judged to be morally right or wrong based on differing principles of moralities which may be theistic, atheistic, utilitarian, deontological or simply egoistic. Nevertheless, each way of evaluating action presupposes that there are certain necessary conditions of an action and it is from the necessary conditions of action that moralities come to prescribe rights. It is from the necessary conditions of actions that we can make a move from “A is human” to “A has certain moral rights.”

What are the necessary conditions of human actions? All actions, in Gewirth’s view, have two generic features which are freedom or voluntariness and purposiveness or intentionality. In morally evaluating an action, it is assumed that the action of the agent is a free, i.e., an uncoerced action where the agent is aware of the circumstances under which the action is carried out. Gewirth calls the second feature “well-being” where well-being consists in having the abilities and conditions that are least minimally needed for all successful action.<sup>4</sup>

Freedom and well-being together constitute the necessary conditions of human agency to which all humans have a right (Gewirth 2007: 222-223). The right to

<sup>4</sup> Elaborating on the concept of well-being, he says that there are three different levels of well-being. First, there is basic well-being which includes having life, physical integrity, and mental equilibrium. Second, there is non-subtractive well-being, which includes not being lied to, not having promises to oneself broken, and so forth. And third, there is additive well-being which includes education, self-esteem and other conditions of making progress in one’s abilities of agency.

well-being in Gewirth's account is essentially the right to be free from poverty. A violation of this right results in poverty, and what is unjust about poverty is that it affects the moral agency of the human being. Gewirth argues that persons lose their capacity to act as moral agents because their freedom and their well-being are undermined by their lack of the means to subsistence. They then cannot make independent decisions about their life and bear the responsibility of those decisions. This state of being is a matter of grave injustice and hence cannot be condoned. It strikes at the root of self-esteem and human dignity. What is therefore wrong with the violation of the right to well-being is what it causes in a human being thus wronged. Amartya Sen (2000; 2005) in his many writings on human freedom (substantive freedom) and well-being in the context of the capability theory of human development has also subscribed to the view that loss of well-being amounts to loss of moral agency which in effect is a loss of substantive freedom as he understands it.

Thomas Pogge (2007) also justifies the right to be free from poverty on the basis of the concept of justice. But unlike Gewirth, for Pogge the unjust character of poverty is caused by unfair and unjust socioeconomic policies which have dominated and continue to dominate international relations between developed and developing countries. Pogge discusses two types of causes of poverty which make it an unjust state of being, viz. "acts" (that foreseeably and avoidably aggravate poverty) and "omissions" (that fail to alleviate poverty) (Pogge 2007: 16–20). Pogge also states the relevance of "time frames" in assessing the kinds of duties that become incumbent on agents (including affluent countries) in dealing with severe poverty in poorer countries. A shorter time frame can pin the cause to local conditions, whereas a larger time frame would bring "colonialism, slavery and genocide into the picture" as determining causes of poverty (Pogge 2007: 21). Pogge concludes that "[t]he different ways of specifying time frames and of distinguishing acts and omissions show, one might say, that there is a conventional element in the causal explanations we give" (Pogge 2007: 22).

## The Right to be Free from Poverty: The Humanitarian Approach

Tom Campbell (2007) adopts a different approach from Gewirth and Pogge when he looks at poverty as the violation of a human right, which is justified on the principle of humanity. He says "...with respect to extreme poverty—strategically and morally—we should put 'humanity before justice'" (Campbell 2007:56). Some thinkers are not willing to admit the RFP to be a *separate* right since they are of the view that poverty is the result of violation of other standardly accepted basic human rights. Although Campbell concedes that point, nonetheless, he argues that the RFP deserves a separate status since to construe poverty as merely a result of the violation of other rights would undermine that aspect of suffering which is at the core of poverty. Hence, Campbell holds that the right to be free from poverty must be admitted as a separate right. According to Campbell, "[i]f we are to argue persuasively that poverty is a human rights violation, it needs to be made clear that we are speaking of poverty in its paradigm sense of lacking the basic material provisions to support a minimally acceptable way of life..."

(Campbell 2007: 60), where deprivation of material provisions would be directly identified with malnutrition, homelessness, and the high probability of ill health and premature death. He defines absolute poverty as, “a deprivation of that which is required to live a life that is worse than that delineated by standards (stating basic needs, minimum capabilities, etc.) that apply irrespective of relative holdings” (Campbell 2007: 60). Thus, Campbell argues that, “everyone has a right to the means of basic subsistence: the right to the material and social conditions necessary to remain alive, in normal health and reasonable comfort. This is a universal right (it applies to everyone everywhere), as it is undeniably an important (perhaps the most important) right, and it is something that we can individually and collectively do something about, so that it is a clear candidate for being categorized as a separate human right” (Campbell 2007: 61).

What constitutes a violation of the RFP? The question is important to the extent that knowing what the nature of the violation of the RFP is will indicate how one can draw up a program to stop this violation and succeed in eradicating poverty. There are two responses to the question:

1. The RFP may be violated when poverty is the result of the culpable conduct of some people, a view held by Thomas Pogge who maintains that poverty is the result of unfair trade practices and inequitable power relations among nation states.
2. The RFP may be violated when people fail to do some actions which would help those in extreme poverty to escape from that condition.

It may be noted that 1 above is an instance of commission of a wrong act (generating circumstances which produce poverty or are conducive to producing poverty), whereas 2 is the omission of a right act (that of failing to help the needy). Pogge (2007) has discussed the intricacies and complexities of distinguishing acts of commission from acts of omission in pronouncing an act to be morally wrong. The truth is that both 1 and 2 are responsible for severe global poverty that prevails and any attempt to eradicate poverty would need to look at what unfair conditions/policies of global trade, etc., are conducive to causing global poverty as well as what the global community is failing to do on humanitarian grounds to try and get rid of poverty. However, in terms of actual efficacy of the two approaches to eradicate poverty there could be a difference of opinion as is seen among philosophers.

For Campbell, both 1 and 2 are important but to construe the violation involved in the first way raises difficult questions about culpability which may obstruct and compromise the effort to eradicate poverty. This is not so in the second case. According to Campbell, the first approach has “the unfortunate implication that the only poverty that we should prioritize is that which results from official action or the failures of unjust social and economic systems, rather than, for instance, the product of natural disasters or in themselves innocent individual acts whose unforeseeable cumulative effects result in economic harms” (Campbell 2007: 62). He accepts the second approach which aims at eradicating poverty for what it is,

viz. acute suffering which calls for eliminating it on humanitarian grounds (rather than looking for what caused it) by motivating people to do whatever is feasible to help those afflicted by it.

Campbell emphasizes that the moral duty/obligation to eradicate poverty is a duty of humanity stemming from traits like benevolence, altruism, caring, rather than a duty of justice which is motivated by ideas of fairness, merit, desert, etc. In saying this, Campbell is rejecting the thesis that poverty, which is a violation of human rights, is always the result of culpable conduct of others (view held by Pogge). On the contrary, poverty which results as a violation of human rights prevails and persists on account of the fact that those in a position to do something to alleviate it are not doing anything or not doing enough. The truth is that it is the failure to alleviate poverty along with our complicity in or actually causing poverty that should be regarded as violating poverty-related human rights. As he puts it,

We have a powerful obligation to eradicate all poverty, whatever its causes and we do not want to make this eradication dependent on how that poverty comes about, and certainly not on establishing who or what is to blame in bringing it about..... We can dispense with moral niceties of the sort presented in theories of international justice as to *why* the persistence of poverty is morally wrong and get on with the task of working out how to remedy what is agreed to be a morally unacceptable state of affairs, and then motivate ourselves and others to do something about it. It is not what is wrong, but how to put it right that is the prime issue (Campbell 2007: 62 - 63).

Campbell also asserts that the idea of poverty as a human rights violation endorses the strong message against bifurcating and admitting a hierarchy of rights. Torture and poverty are equal violations of basic human rights.

Against Gewirth's position, Campbell says, "I have doubts about this way of identifying the prime evil of poverty. The loss of opportunity to act morally is an important but secondary matter compared with the suffering involved in extreme poverty" (Campbell 2007: 64). Gewirth, we must recall was of the view that the RFP is justified because a violation of this right causes loss of moral agency of the afflicted people. In other words, those in abject poverty lose their capacity to be moral agents since moral agency requires freedom and well-being as preconditions. In Campbell's opinion, the causal precondition approach underplays the fact of suffering involved in poverty, making it only "incidental to the evil of poverty"—something which may or may not follow as a result of loss of moral agency. When, in the case of poverty, the focus shifts from the suffering aspect to loss of moral agency, the motivation to do something about eradicating poverty also diminishes. Consequently, the urgency of the moral obligation to alleviate poverty also declines. Campbell sums up by saying, "There are reasons to adopt a humanitarian rather than a neo-Kantian interpretation of the intrinsic evil of poverty" (Campbell 2007: 65).

## **Duty to Free one from poverty: The Transcendental Causal Approach**

The phenomenon of extreme poverty is a grim reality in a developing country like India. This may be partially attributed to its burgeoning population, lack of adequate infrastructure for socioeconomic development, illiteracy, and a colonial past, but,



perhaps, poverty has also persisted due to a religious mindset that treats it as a necessary evil. Is there anything about poverty that suggests that it is a necessary part of human existence? In a sense relative poverty is a necessary feature of human existence but how can one hold that extreme poverty is also a necessary feature of some human existence? According to the theory of *karma*, a theory held by many schools of ancient Indian philosophy,<sup>5</sup> every human being is necessarily bearing out the fruit of his/her actions (*karma phala*) of some previous birth or many such births in his/her present birth. Morally right actions produce good karmic consequences and one is born in circumstances conducive to a good life, whereas morally wrong actions generate bad karmic consequences and one is born in circumstances not conducive to a good life. Both the relatively affluent person and the relatively poor person are exhausting their karmic consequences in their present birth; the only difference is that the former has less of bad *karma phala* than the latter. This is a transcendental account of the phenomenon of relative poverty or relative affluence. It is believed that the cycle of birth–death–rebirth takes place for a retributive purpose and that purpose is to exhaust the past *karma phala* that one has accrued as a baggage and which needs to be exhausted. Once that is exhausted one attains redemption (liberation) provided that no new *karma phala* has accumulated. But, how does one ensure that no further bad *karma phala* accumulates so that one can transcend this cycle of birth–death–rebirth? The simple answer is by acting according to the prescribed dharmic (dharma ordained) duties (moral duties prescribed by dharma) determined by one's station in life. It is the prime duty of the householder to support the poor needy and those who cannot support themselves materially (say the physically and mentally challenged or those who have renounced the world and are dependent on society for such sustenance). It is also the professional duty of the ruler (*raj dharma*) to support the same class of people. Hence, the positive duty of aiding the poor is the duty of every individual as well as the state. It is enjoined that this duty to help the poor is to be fulfilled not out of a sense of self-interest but out of a sense of duty for duty's sake.

Thus, both relative and absolute poverty are nothing but the results of past karmic consequences generated by one's own past actions not necessarily of the present birth. It was also held that the natural law of *karma* is instrumental in delivering justice since wrong acts need to be punished just as right actions need to be rewarded. Poverty or affluence was explained as the just desert of morally wrong or right acts, respectively, committed in the past by the agent, and present actions will similarly yield appropriate fruit in the future. But, notwithstanding this causal transcendental metaphysical explanation of poverty and affluence, each system of Indian philosophy which espoused this view maintained that it is the prime dharmic (dharma ordained) duty to alleviate the suffering (to whatever extent possible) of the less fortunate one. So, poverty alleviation was also considered as the prime *dharma* ordained duty of individuals living in society. Thus, poverty, retributive justice, and positive duties to render help to the poor and needy all had a causal but transcendental metaphysical linkage. One may take the stand that the poverty eradication

<sup>5</sup> Every school of ancient Indian philosophy barring the Indian materialistic school of thought.



program of the Indian government (for example, the Antyodaya and other schemes) as well as the individual initiatives of the people are driven by this deep rooted philosophy based on ancient Indian philosophical texts.

## **Collective Responsibility: The Moral Psychology Approach to Poverty**

Judith Lichtenberg (2014) is of the view that the language of rights and perfect duties to alleviate poverty is misguided. Her concerns are more practical because she is interested in the question how we can motivate individuals to help in this mission. She very aptly says, “No moral or philosophical theory is needed to generate concern about the coexistence, in the real world, of wealth and excess on the one hand with extreme poverty on the other... and that those who are able should work to alter it” (Lichtenberg 2014: 6-7). Thus, rather than justifying the right to be free from poverty, Lichtenberg wants to adopt an “alternative approach” whereby she raises the question about individual responsibility—what should I do—although she thinks that this question is best answered in terms of solving the problem by relating it to the collective one—what should we do? She is of the opinion that the terms “help,” “aid,” “assistance” suggest that the person who aids is not causally responsible for the situation of those who need aid; the words suggest charity and optionality rather than justice and obligation.

## **Extent of the Moral Obligation to Eradicate Poverty**

Having got some insight into the principles justifying the right to be free from poverty, we can now turn to some concerns about the extent and nature of the moral obligation to eradicate poverty. The concerns that arise are, as O’Neill (2004) has put it, “*who owes what to whom.*” In other words,

1. Is it the responsibility of the individual or the collective (including the State and its subsidiary institutions) to help the needy poor;
2. Does the nature of the help that one can render include both positive and negative duties and
3. Is the help to be extended to those separated by distance and affective relations also?

## **Who Owes...**

Most thinkers would agree that there is a moral obligation to help the poor whether or not they can claim a right to be free from the poverty afflicting them. Regarding the question about who should bear the responsibility of fulfilling or trying to fulfill the moral obligation to remove poverty, Campbell states his view quite clearly. He says, “subsistence rights are grounded primarily in the universal humanitarian obligation to participate in the relief of extreme suffering. The universality of this

obligation is relative to the capacity of the person or collective to contribute to the reduction of extreme poverty..." (Campbell 2007: 67). He is also confident that "humanitarian reasoning can provide a basis for adopting strong, focused and justiciable schemes for eradicating poverty" (Campbell 2007: 67). So, for Campbell the moral obligation in question is incumbent on every individual/collective depending on the capability to fulfill that obligation. Judith Lichtenberg also would support such a view except that she is against the use of "individual" and "duty" but emphasizes that the moral responsibilities belong to collectives rather than individuals and also that this responsibility cannot be too demanding. She argues against a view that Samuel Scheffler (1986) describes as "morality demands what it demands" and if people find it hard to fulfill the demands of morality then they are not "morally very good." Too stringent views about the positive duties of assistance are bound to fail to produce the desirable goal of poverty eradication.

There is a persisting debate whether it is the sole responsibility of the State and its institutions as well as global institutions to address the phenomenon of world poverty, thereby absolving the role of individual citizens. Onora O'Neill has discussed the issues at great length in her illuminating essay "Global justice: whose obligations?" (2004) and holds that to regard reduction of poverty as the responsibility of state organizations alone would be to combine "cosmopolitan aspirations with statist assumptions" (O'Neill 2004: 243), a view which raises difficult questions about responsibility vis-à-vis the capability of weaker states to eliminate poverty in the global socioeconomic scenario and the power equations which define and determine it. She holds that, "in the absence of efficient reform of state or international institutions, which may take a long time, it is imperative to look into the prospect of NGOs and TNCs as effective international benefactors" (in Introduction, Chatterjee 2004: 7). There is no doubt that the sincere intention to eradicate global poverty has to be a multipronged endeavor on the part of the state and international organizations which set and regulate policies of governance which affect the global community. NGOs and TNCs definitely have a significant role to play in this effort.

### What...

A related question is that of the nature of the duty incumbent on individuals and the state (including its subsidiary institutions). Do individuals and collectives have positive duties of assistance or only negative duties of not causing harm? A positive duty is that which requires us to assist others when they are gravely imperiled and we can rescue them at no unreasonable cost. On the other hand, a negative duty is that which prohibits us from harming others. The standard view is that negative duties are stricter but less demanding on individuals than positive duties which are more demanding but easy to wriggle out of. Thomas Pogge espouses the negative duty approach to global poverty, whereas Peter Singer clearly advocates positive duties of aid in his much acclaimed paper "Famine, Affluence and Morality" (1972). The distinction itself is a topic of much debate because of the complexities involved, and therefore, Lichtenberg (2014) casts some doubt over it arguing that negative duties are not necessarily less demanding.

With respect to the state and the nature of the duties that it owes to its people, we have a clear divide between the liberalist or the welfarist on the one hand who advocate positive duties of welfare and the libertarians, like Nozick (1974), who deny this and instead talk of the “minimalist state.” This issue gets more complicated when the question is about the state extending welfare schemes to the distant needy. In the global context, Pogge is of the view that negative duties are more important which entail not to benefit from an institution that wrongly harms others and requires us to work for reforming the current practices of international politics and business. Just as we should not personally harm others nor should we support such institutions which do so.

Alan Gewirth distinguishes between the internal conditions and external conditions (*vis-à-vis* poverty) that are responsible for the level of poverty existing in a state. According to him, the most frequent objection raised against positive duties of foreign governments to aid poorer countries is that the poverty in any country is due to domestic factors like inefficient or corrupt political and business institutions and this is not due to the foreign influences or by accidents. This was the view of John Rawls too in his *The Law of the Peoples* (2001). But this is a wrong view according to Pogge and needs clarification. According to Pogge, while expressing such a viewpoint one forgets that “existing people have arrived at their present level of social, economic, and cultural development through a historical process that was pervaded by enslavement, colonialism and even genocide” (Pogge 2007: 31), and though these are now past, they have left great inequalities in the devastated societies. Pogge concludes that, “[t]he overall evolution of poverty worldwide can be explained when the country specific factors are coupled with the global factors” (Pogge 2007: 31). So, positive assistance is not the only thing that needs to be done to help the people who are poor and living far off and starving. But we should also give emphasis on the negative duties that hold that developed societies should not take advantage of injustice at the expense of poor victims. If we fail to do so, then we are harming the poor. This is what Campbell means when he says that the violation in poverty is “failing to do what is within one’s means to do.”

## To whom

The next relevant question to be addressed is—to whom do individuals/social institutions owe the duty to help? Is it only limited to people who are close in distance and/or affective relations (irrespective of the distance), citizens of the state, or the global poor in general? With the spread and impact of globalization, moral and political philosophers have become increasingly concerned to assess duties to help the poor people living far off in distant countries. Lichtenberg cites four conditions which have contributed to the prominence of the issue. They are affluence, awareness, power and Egalitarianism. (2014) It is a matter of considerable debate whether the moral obligation to aid people varies with distance, i.e., do we have a stronger duty to aid those who are physically near to us than those who are thousands of miles away from us?

Both Singer (2004) and Arneson (2004) advocate positive duties that we have toward the absolutely poor in the world. According to Singer, it makes no moral difference whether one helps a person nearby or some distant needy. Our obligation to assist someone does not depend on distance. He holds that “[i]f it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought morally to do it” (Singer 1972: 231). Again, he says, “[i]f we accept any principle of impartiality, universalizability, equality, or whatever, we cannot discriminate against someone merely because he is far away from us” (Singer 1972: 232).

The ethical tradition that bases morality on human nature claims that distance does matter morally because human nature is such that it is unsuited to show equal concern to distant people and events compared to those near in time and place. It does seem intuitively obvious that distance both physical and relational makes a significant difference in our obligation to help others. Intuition seems to tell us that we should help someone in need nearby over someone similarly situated in faraway places. However, if this is true, then it is also true by virtue of the fact that perceiving poverty triggers emotions in us which prompt us to help the needy whose need we can perceive. But, in a globalized world where stark images of poverty across the globe are easily visible, it is mere “sophistry” to argue that distance makes a difference. Of course, as a matter of logistic practicality it may be more effective to help the near needy and poor without overruling the need to help the distant poor.

Similarly, it is a fact that we feel a greater obligation to help those with whom we have a relation or affective ties than to help strangers. Distance seems to set moral boundaries, and distant strangers are accorded minimal moral concern. There are several philosophers like Samuel Scheffler (2001) and Alasdair MacIntyre who claim that we have special obligations toward our family, friends, fellow citizens, etc. MacIntyre (1984) shows the relativism in the practice of assistance. He holds that the family, clan, tribe nation are the various aspects of life which give it the moral particularity. But Singer rejects any kind of discrimination in providing aid to needy people. He holds that no doubt we do instinctively prefer to help those who are close to us. But the question is not what we usually do but what we ought to do, and it is difficult to see any sound moral justification of the view that distances or community membership makes a crucial difference to our obligation to help. It is unacceptable to allow people to suffer from starvation, lack of necessities, etc., when one is in position to help them. “... suffering and death from a lack of food clothing, adequate shelter and medical care are bad” (Singer 1972: 231).

It is true that the phenomenon of abject poverty is primarily a matter of perception<sup>6</sup> and realization that it is an unjust and unfair state of being and that something needs to be done to remove it. Walking through some areas in Delhi if one fails to *notice* the poverty of homeless pavement dwellers living in shanties or in the slums, simply because that scene has become almost a permanent fixture of that place, we will hardly be troubled by it. We may not even think twice about it. Somewhere, the deprivation and suffering faced by the poor needs to stir up the sentiment of

<sup>6</sup> Here I take “perception” in a broad sense to include knowing and imagining also.

discomfort along with the sense that one can do something about it that will lead to any proactive approach to poverty. In that sense, the Humean standpoint about our sense of morality (what is morally right or wrong) seems right. It is only the urge to get rid of the feeling of discomfort on seeing poverty that will lead us to think about its causes and means to minimize it. Here again, the likely perceptibility, i.e., the fact that we perceive the needs of those related to us more readily because, perhaps, they are in close proximity to us or at least “in touch with us” more than others who are not so related, determines our desire to help them and this is natural and normal. But, it should not deter us from helping those who are not so related to us.

Having realized that poverty needs to be addressed, it does help to get into the philosophical exercise of justifying the right to be free from poverty since sound reasoning about its causes, nature and extent of the moral obligation to alleviate it would provide the vision and help us to think realistically about ways in which the mission to eradicate poverty can be accomplished.

## Conclusion

The issues discussed above need to be viewed from the point of “what one ought to do” and not perhaps from what one is likely to do or what one actually does as a matter of fact. If the aim is to eradicate world poverty, it must come across to us as a “moral mission” not merely a “moral decision” made by some agent/agency. And, the “moral mission” goes hand in hand with a moral conviction that when it comes to abject poverty which is gross suffering and the likelihood of disease and premature death, then it is a human moral obligation incumbent on all to do whatever we can to help the needy poor irrespective of distance and/or the presence or absence of family ties. Human moral obligations are moral obligations that humans owe to all humans by virtue of being the constitutive and regulatory principles that ought to guide human conduct (Motilal 2015: 132–137). Human moral obligations are based on the principle of “equal humanity” which is the principle that in essence every human being (irrespective of the contingent differences that make them different) shares the same “humanity” and to the same extent. The human moral obligations that need to guide human conduct are defined by the specific roles and relationships that one finds oneself in and by the real-life circumstances that constrain them. Thus, one can argue that there is an absolute duty to help the poor and needy though the nature of this duty is relative to the means available to one and the circumstances in which the duty is carried out. There are rules, roles and relations that guide our human moral obligations or duties. What is of utmost importance is the conviction that one has such a duty, that one owes such a duty to oneself as well others around us. The rule of thumb to follow is—As one person I cannot change the world, but I can change the world of one person. This, of course, may take care of the local poverty around us but what about global poverty—the obligation to help the distant stranger? Here, the simple truth is that if each one follows his/her duty then collectively most people are likely to follow suit (a point made by Lichtenberg in her study of the moral psychology of giving, Lichtenberg 2014) and those who lag behind will also tend to catch up. Campbell in emphasizing the humanitarian nature

of the obligation to eradicate poverty and Lichtenberg in emphasizing the collective aspect of it, also seem to be emphasizing this point. What is important in achieving the mission to eradicate poverty is what Richard Rorty has delineated as “sentimental education” (Richard Rorty 1993: 128). If “sentimental education” did help in the abolition of slavery and other social evils, it can also help in the eradication of absolute global poverty. One needs to be convinced that if one is fortunate to have a relatively comfortable life then that is only a matter of “moral luck,” a contingent fact that could have been otherwise. What is needed is the ability to identify with the other in an inclusive way—that you might have been in the poor person’s “shoes” and that, if, fortunately, you are not, then it is merely a contingent fact of “moral luck.” The adage “charity begins at home” is not without its element of truth except that it should not entail that it should end there and not be extended to those who are not in proximate distances or relations. The state and its institutions must draw up short- and long-term plans to address the goal of poverty eradication one of which should include imparting “sentimental education” to its people.

Eradication of abject global poverty is a tall order but with the global where-withal it is not impossible. In this respect, the task of the philosopher is not idle speculation. It is to build conviction based on debates justifying a right to be free from poverty and the correlative duty to help mitigate it together with a discussion of moral concerns about the nature, extent, and scope of this duty. Our human moral obligations specifically the moral obligation to remove or lessen world poverty, to the extent we can, will result from our moral conviction that it is wrong. And this may very well result from humanitarian considerations. The truth, I think, is best expressed by Campbell when he says, “While it may sometimes be a better short-term strategy to base a policy to eradicate extreme worldwide poverty on considerations of justice alone, there are tactical as well as philosophical reasons for arguing that the moral duty to help those in extreme material need is based primarily on considerations of humanity and only secondarily on justice” Campbell 2007:74).

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