

Stumbling and Mumbling

An extremist, not a fanatic

August 05, 2005

What do we owe the world's poor?

Charity dictates that we support [this appeal](#). But does our obligation to help the world's poor go beyond this? Do we have a deeper moral duty to help than mere charity?

This question hasn't gotten anything like the attention it deserves.

The government's position is clear, though implicit. The Department for International Development's budget this year is £4.5bn. Spending on social security will be £127.3bn. It clearly believes, therefore, that our duties to relatively poor Britons are vastly greater than our duties to absolutely poor Africans.

But are they? There are four separate arguments that we have a much stronger duty to help the world's poor than these numbers suggest.

1. Utilitarianism. The money we westerners spend on luxuries could save the lives of the poor, or vastly improve them. Maximizing happiness therefore requires huge cuts in luxury spending here to finance global redistribution. Peter Singer [has said](#): "Whatever money you're spending on luxuries, not necessities, should be given away." This is one implication of utilitarianism which [Richard Layard](#) overlooks.
2. Redistribution as insurance. Ronald Dworkin has argued for redistribution of income on the basis that it replicates the insurance policies we would have taken out before being born, had we had the chance to do so. We should redistribute to the handicapped or unskilled, he says, because we would have taken out insurance against being born handicapped or unskilled, if we could have. Now, it's a huge misfortune to be born in Niger rather than Nuneaton. So Dworkin's argument says we should transfer money from Nuneaton to Niger.
3. It's a logical truth that justice is global, simply because moral principles, by definition, are universalizable; this is Robert Goodin's [argument](#) (pdf). It is no more logical to say I owe more to an Englishman than to a Malian than it is to say that I owe more to one from Wigston than one from Tur Langton because I was born nearer Wigston than Tur Langton.
4. Severe poverty represents a violation of human rights, because it results from an unjust global economic system. This is Thomas Pogge's [argument](#) (doc).

So, what are the arguments against all this? Pogge's case has been criticized by [Mathias Risse](#).

There are two arguments that are irrelevant for my case. One is the libertarian one, that any forced redistribution is a violation of rights. This argument, though, applies to internal redistribution as well as foreign redistribution. It doesn't justify us redistributing less to foreigners than to Britons.

Another irrelevant argument is that foreign aid just doesn't work. Let's assume this is empirically true; the [usual candidates](#) dispute it well. This doesn't justify redistributing less to foreigners than to Britons for two reasons. First, because there's also some evidence that redistribution within the UK – at least in the forms it has taken – [doesn't work](#). And second, take this from [Tim Worstall](#):

By concentrating on financial capital we are missing the reason that development is slow or non-existent. Rather, it is a shortage (or multiple shortages) of human, social and institutional capital that is the constraint, and throwing more money at the problem will not just be useless but will in fact make the problems worse.

This a case for the west helping to build institutions, rather than donate money. It's not a case for us doing nothing. Instead, one argument against global redistribution is that – except in extreme cases – the world's poor are not unhappier than relatively poor people in rich societies. Indeed, one survey has found [Nigerians](#) to be the happiest people in the world. This might be because they don't compare their condition to rich westerners, and so don't feel deprived, whereas poor westerners do make the comparison and do feel deprived. This might be an argument against Singer's case for world redistribution. But it's not an argument for redistribution within a nation, because – as Will Wilkinson [points out](#) – it might well be cheaper for relatively poor westerners to change their preferences than for the rich to pay them off. Another argument against world redistribution is in Rawls' [Law of Peoples](#). Society, he says, is a co-operative venture between people of similar values. It's this co-operation that yields duties of redistribution. Because Malians and Britons don't co-operate with each other, there's no duty of redistribution between us. Our duty to Malians is to help them become self-governing and self-sufficient, not to give them money.

Richard Arneson, among others, has [criticized this](#) (pdf). Even if society is a cooperative venture, he says, this only creates prudential, self-interested, reasons to redistribute income – to stop the relatively British poor rebelling or turning to crime. It doesn't create a moral argument for redistribution.

Obviously, I've only given a very rough sketch here – please follow up the links.

My questions are: how strong is the moral (as distinct from prudential) case for redistributing more money internally than externally? And how is the case for internal versus global redistribution affected by multi-culturalism? If members of British society don't have shared common values, what is the argument for internal redistribution over global redistribution?

August 05, 2005 in [Aid](#), [Equality](#), [Philosophy](#) | [Permalink](#)

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There is a reason why redistribution within our society might be expected to work better than redistribution globally: we have better knowledge and understanding of the effects of local aid, and more incentive to ensure that the effects are positive.

Posted by: [Andrew McGuinness](#) | [August 05, 2005 at 11:01 AM](#)



Something of a side issue this, but what do the numbers look like when adjusted for purchasing power parity? I suspect that £100 per week housing benefit would go a rather long way in Niger.

Also - and this is an idea I have not really thought through - spending within an economy - redistribution - feeds back into the system (is spent on UK products and services) and keeps the UK economic ball rolling. Money sent out of the economy (for which nothing in return is received) does not - it goes out of UK circulation. How much money can be siphoned out of the system before it stops being able to replenish itself? Perhaps the true "cost to the UK economy" of (notionally) helping the poor is not captured by the budget line (£127bn versus £4bn). So perhaps we are being a lot more generous with our overseas aid than it looks like (or conversely, a lot less generous with our internal spending).

This could be the most frightful nonsense, or it could be an insight worthy of a Nobel prize. Hard to say really.

Posted by: [Paddy Carter](#) | [August 05, 2005 at 01:01 PM](#)



There's also the relationship between morality and agency. No doubt DFID is currently distributing aid to people in a country I'm only dimly aware of to solve problems of which I've never heard. If you accept that I have a duty to help these people, I'm not really discharging this duty because I'm not actually aware that it exists.

I don't suppose it's going to happen for a minute but it would be interesting if government aid was distributed on a matching funding basis, ie that it doubled (or tripled, or whatever) money privately donated by members of the public. That might incentivise private charities while encouraging the population to take a greater interest in how and where the government discharges aid.

Posted by: [jamie](#) | [August 05, 2005 at 02:51 PM](#)



See the text on "suffering developing countries"

Here: <http://culturefusion.blogspot.com/>

Posted by: [Curious](#) | [August 05, 2005 at 02:54 PM](#)



"I don't suppose it's going to happen for a minute but it would be interesting if government aid was distributed on a matching funding basis, ie that it doubled (or tripled, or whatever) money privately donated by members of the public."

This is more or less what happens in the US. Figures here:

<http://www.techcentralstation.com/0712055.html>

Posted by: [Devil's Kitchen](#) | [August 05, 2005 at 03:54 PM](#)



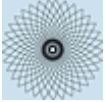
The UK should have an optional income tax that goes towards funding foreign "aid". Anything else is slavery.

Redistribution is "code" for theft. The socialist system of legalised theft ensures that less is produced to be stolen.

The abolishment of slavery was the major moral achievement of the previous century. However the desire to force people to work for your desires is strong, and so the disguised slavery of socialism popped up.

It must be fought with the same vigour.

Posted by: Rob Read | [August 08, 2005 at 12:13 PM](#)



The idea that people suffering from starvation could be as happy-let alone happier-than us, is a bit far-fetched, don't you think?

The idea that we don't owe help to Africans because they are culturally removed from us, begs the following question: were they close enough, culturally, for us to colonise their lands?

Personally, I agree most with Robert Goodin. We owe help to all human beings, regardless of their origin or home.

Furthermore, Africa gives us plenty-in food, riches and culture.

Posted by: jez | [August 08, 2005 at 01:54 PM](#)



Whilst I agree for the large part with this post, perhaps we might look at the ills carried out in the name of universalisable concepts of justice and morality?

Also, I would argue that the line between necessity and luxury is vague and indefinable. There are quotable extremes of course.

Posted by: Pete | [August 09, 2005 at 02:20 PM](#)



"Also, I would argue that the line between necessity and luxury is vague and indefinable."

This is not true! What is a Luxury is purely a personal taste.

Charity is certainly NOT a necessity. It should be funded by personal taste only.

Posted by: Rob Read | [August 10, 2005 at 03:12 PM](#)



"How much money can be siphoned out of the system before it stops being able to replenish itself? Perhaps the true "cost to the UK economy" of (notionally) helping the poor is not captured by the budget line (£127bn versus £4bn)."

As a share of national income the portion of money "siphoned" out of the system is not worth mentioning but it goes a mighty long way towards alleviating symptoms in developing countries(Short-termistic but much needed because of global failure to address the causes). What about the causes? This is where the real issues for Africa lie. Ever heard of giving with one hand and taking with the other? Net movement = zero

Posted by: [curious](#) | [August 10, 2005 at 05:13 PM](#)



curious,

my point was to ask whether measuring aid as a proportion of nation income is misleading. Your response that "as a share of national income the portion ... is not worth mentioning" rather illustrates my point.

This is not an argument against giving generously, just an argument that the issue is (/might be) commonly mischaracterised.

As for the notion that the cause of poverty in Africa, the real issue, is the West giving with one hand and taking with the other ... well I think you need to expand on that.

Posted by: Paddy Carter | [August 16, 2005 at 07:58 AM](#)



"This doesn't justify redistributing less to foreigners than to Britons for two reasons. First, because there's also some evidence that redistribution within the UK – at least in the forms it has taken – doesn't work."

the "some evidence" being this:

"Great Ormonde Street Hospital, since it caters to children, is a major recipient of charitable funds. My own father left money to it in his will. But this same hospital has closed beds - putting capacity into mothballs."

I think you need to do better than that!

Not, I add, that I want to argue we necessarily have greater obligations to fellow-citizens or neighbours than to people we've never heard of, in countries we know virtually nothing about. I became my mother's carer rather than a carer for an old, ill, woman in Africa for obvious reasons of proximity and social expectation. Still, I might say (and I think I would) that an additional factor, that does have moral purchase, was her bearing and rearing of, and caring for, me. I owed her in a way that I do not directly owe a mother in Botswana. Am I deluding myself when I say this? I, like jez, tend to agree with Bob Goodin on points like this -- and I agree with you, jez, Africa has given us much -- so, I am not sure.

Posted by: [jayann](#) | [August 19, 2005 at 01:17 AM](#)



Just to be fussy, I think Dworkin thinks that his metric of equality applies only within states, that we have special obligations to whomsoever we share a polity with. I've certainly never come across anything he's said about global justice.

Posted by: [Rob](#) | [August 25, 2005 at 12:01 AM](#)



Impossible, how GOOD your work is. I am really surprised. <http://gaymedical.ifrance.com/>

Posted by: [doctorhorny](#) | [September 16, 2007 at 03:33 PM](#)



I have bookmarked you yet!!!! <http:// straponcrush.ifrance.com/>

Posted by: [femdom strapon](#) | [September 25, 2007 at 04:38 PM](#)



Doesn't matter what you say, but how...!! But you said it well <http:// straponcrush2.ibelgique.com/>

Posted by: [strapon sex](#) | [October 07, 2007 at 10:24 AM](#)

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