

Poverty

The debate about poverty raises the question: what are we morally required to do to help other people? Everyone accepts that it is good to help those who need help. But is it obligatory? If so, are we required to help those near to us, or also people far away?

We must distinguish this question from the different and very difficult question of what the best way to help the poor is. This second question is the one most often discussed in debates about whether we should give to people begging on the street; or whether we should give aid to people in other countries who are dying from lack of food or natural disasters. Of course, if we have a duty to help the poor, it makes sense to help in the most effective way, over the long term. But what the most effective way of helping is, is not our question, and we will not discuss it.

UTILITARIANISM

Act utilitarianism claims that if we do not do what maximizes happiness, then we act wrongly. So if we can prevent something bad, such as the suffering caused by poverty, then we should prevent it (unless preventing it will cause more unhappiness). So, for example, if a child is drowning in a pond, and I can save her, then I should – even though I will get my clothes muddied. But what is the moral difference between saving a drowning child and saving a starving child in another country? If I can save that child, for instance by giving all the money to charity that I would otherwise spend on things I don't need – like nice clothes and DVDs – then this is what I should do.

We can object that if I am morally required to try to help all poor children, then it will always be wrong for me to spend anything on myself. True – but aren't other people's lives more important than our clothes and DVDs? The balance between looking after ourselves and helping other people is itself determined by what will bring about the best consequences overall. The act utilitarian argues that whenever we can help someone, without a greater cost to ourselves, we should.

Rule utilitarianism agrees that we have a duty to help the poor. However, our duty is only to help as much as would be needed if everyone helped, because what is morally required is following rules that would maximise happiness if everyone followed them. Act utilitarians object that this rule will lead to much less happiness – because we know that not everyone will help as they should. So we must help more.

DEONTOLOGY AND PRACTICAL WISDOM

People have a right not to be harmed, so it is always wrong to harm them. But, many deontologists argue, people do not have a similar right to be helped, so it is not always wrong not to help them. While we may have some duty help others, but we are not required to help on every possible occasion. For instance, we may say that, if you have gained what you own, e.g. your money, without harming others, then you have a right to keep it or do with it as you choose. If you have a right to your money, that means that

you don't have a duty to give it away to help the poor. Aquinas, however, argues that the point of material goods is to satisfy our needs. If they are not being used to satisfy needs, then they are not being used rightly. Whatever we don't need, therefore, in a sense belongs to the poor more rightly than it belongs to us.

The act utilitarian approach overlooks or perhaps rejects the strong sense we have that each person has a special relationship to their own projects and lives. To say that helping the poor is required conflicts with the idea that our own flourishing, our own lives and what we want to do with them, matter to each of us in a unique way. The happiness of others does not (need to) play the same role in making our decisions as our own happiness. Poverty places a duty on us to help – so that it is wrong never to be charitable, but we are not required to make great sacrifices in our own lives.