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**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Brown, Chris (2017) *Poverty alleviation, global justice, and the real world*. [Ethics & International Affairs](#) 31, (3) pp. 357-365 ISSN 1747-7093

DOI: [10.1017/S0892679417000247](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679417000247)

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Available in LSE Research Online: October 2017

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Ethics & International Affairs 31, no.3 (2017) pp 357 – 365.

Poverty Alleviation, Global Justice, and the Real World

Chris Brown

Responding to Global Poverty: Harm, Responsibility, and Agency, Christian Barry and Gerhard Øverland (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 272 pp., \$99.99 cloth.

Abstract:

For nearly half a century, political theorists have wrestled with the problem of global social justice, producing evermore elaborate and analytically sophisticated models, but without engaging significantly with, or materially influencing, real-world politics. *Responding to Global Poverty: Harm, Responsibility, and Agency* summarizes this discourse very effectively, but without transcending its limits. The actual causes of global poverty are barely touched upon, and the “agency” in the subtitle of the book is almost exclusively that of the affluent world. The impression remains that those seeking answers to the problem of global poverty would be well advised to look elsewhere than towards analytical political theory.

The modern literature on responding to global poverty is over fifty years old and has attracted the attention of some of the most prominent analytical political theorists of the age, including Brian Barry, Charles Beitz, Simon Caney, Thomas Pogge, John Rawls, and Peter Singer. Yet in spite of this extraordinary concentration of brainpower, the problem of global poverty has quite clearly not been solved, or, indeed adequately defined.¹ We are therefore entitled to ask two questions of any new contribution to this literature: first, what does it have to offer that past work does not; and second, what reason is there to think that, this time, it will truly make a difference. These questions will be posed below, but before undertaking this task it may be useful to offer an overview of the field, with particular attention to why the problem of global poverty seems so intractable.²

A BACKGROUNDER ON POVERTY AND GLOBAL JUSTICE

This overview must start with Peter Singer's 1972 essay "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," which was one of the first attempts by a political philosopher to address the problem of global poverty and inequality. Singer—a radical utilitarian—wrote at the time of the Bengaladesh famine, and noted that more money was being spent on projects such as the Sydney Opera House than on poverty relief, a situation he regarded as morally wrong. His argument was deceptively simple: (1) suffering and death from lack of food and shelter are bad; (2) if it is in our power to stop something bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance (or, in a weaker version, anything morally significant), we ought so to do; and (3) distance is more or less irrelevant, so the fact that the death and suffering are taking place on another continent rather than by our back door does not affect our duty to act (although it may affect our ability to act). If we spend money on things we do not really need—such as opera houses or, for that matter, clothes if the clothes we already possess are adequate for the purpose of keeping us warm—we do wrong. This is a simple argument and one that many people find compelling, although it does rest on the utilitarian principle that all goods are directly comparable and can be handled by the same calculus. An interesting feature of Singer's argument, though, is that although it is often thought compelling, it rarely changes behavior; Singer has repeated the argument, with minor variations, in a number of publications over the last forty-five years, which is inadvertent testimony to how ineffective it actually is in actually getting people to act on the principles he defends.³ Interestingly, some of Singer's arguments on other issues *have* been effective in the real world. For example, I know some people who have become vegetarians or vegans after reading his *Animal Liberation*, but as far as I know, very few have followed through on the logic of "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." Why not? Partly, no doubt, because it is too

demanding, but also because Singer's argument does not provide, or attempt to provide, a convincing account of the general context—historical and institutional—of global poverty and inequality. Addressing this context is the claim of the discourse of global justice.

Most Anglo-American theories of justice of the last half century draw on, revise, rework, or extend John Rawls's great work *A Theory of Justice*, but for theories of *international* justice Rawls's legacy is, at best, ambiguous. At the center of his theory is the proposition that the outlines of a just society emerge from a social contract, entered into under ideal conditions, which produces (first) political equality and (second) the "difference principle," which states that economic and social inequalities are just if and only if such inequalities work to the benefit of the least advantaged members of the society.⁴ This latter qualification is a challenging requirement that, if adopted, would require all existing societies to undergo radical change; and the debate among theorists of domestic social justice revolves around the question of whether this change is radical enough or, alternatively, whether it ought to be based on different principles (such as, for example, radical egalitarianism). However, Rawls's account of international justice produces a different discourse, because he argues that the contract that would be agreed upon by just societies coming together to create a just international society would be limited to the equivalent of political equality—that is, sovereign equality under the rule of international law—and, crucially, would not include the equivalent of an international "difference principle."

From the outset, critics have resisted this position. If there is a pressing need to justify inequalities in domestic society, then surely it is perverse to suggest that international inequalities do not require justification. But that, indeed, is Rawls's position, reiterated in a late work, *The Law of Peoples*. He argues that well-ordered members of the society of peoples have a duty to assist those societies that are currently incapable, for one reason or another, of meeting the criteria for membership to reach the necessary level of political and

social development, but this duty to assist is not a cosmopolitan principle, and inequality within the society of peoples is not necessarily problematic.⁵ International society is, on his account, not the kind of society that is based on a cooperative scheme for mutual advantage; there is no global *demos* and there is no basis for a principle of distributive justice. Various arguments against this position have been presented over the years, ranging from the idea that there should be an initial contract to see if contractors are willing to accept the idea of separate societies, and if so, on what terms;⁶ to changes in the assumptions made about what societies would agree to under ideal conditions;⁷ to an alternative perspective rejecting the idea of mutual advantage altogether.⁸ Arguments for global justice have rested on the implications of the Kantian Categorical Imperative⁹ or on the neo-Marxist argument that the poverty of the poor is a by-product of the wealth of the rich, and that those who currently benefit from the history of imperialism are obligated to make things right for those who have been its victims.¹⁰

In sum, theories of global justice have become more and more complex over the decades, but they have one thing in common with the earliest critiques of Rawls, and that is that they have had more or less no effect on real-world politics. The case can be made that there is less real poverty in the world today than one or two decades ago (more on this below), but insofar as this is the case, it is because of the workings of the world economy and, in particular, the development of China and (to a lesser extent) India, and not because of the success of philosophical arguments in favor of global equality.

Why this apparent impotence? Thomas Nagel offers one explanation: theories of global justice invariably involve the need to coordinate the activities of large numbers of people, which in turn requires the existence of government. Global justice theorists despair of the possibility of world government and hope to achieve their objectives instead via a commitment to “moral cosmopolitanism,” but such a commitment is impotent in the face of

the implications of actually trying to think of the world as constituting a single society.¹¹ There is, perhaps, a wider point here, made by a school of thought sometimes termed the “new political realism.” In a key statement, “Realism and Moralism in Political Theory,” Bernard Williams critiqued two accounts of the relationship between politics and ethics.¹² First, he identifies the *enactment model* whereby principles, concepts, ideals, and values are formulated in theory, and politics is given the task of enacting what has been formulated, using persuasion or by exercising power. Utilitarian thought such as that of Singer often takes this form. Then he outlines the *structural model* where theory lays down the conditions under which power can be justly exercised. Unlike the enactment model, this account of morality does not directly tell us what politics must achieve, but rather sets constraints on what politics can rightly do. Both Rawls and his critics adopt this approach. In both of these models the moral is prior to the political. Williams terms this *political moralism* and contrasts it unfavorably with *political realism*, which acknowledges the need to secure order as the first unavoidable, political question. This sounds Hobbesian, but Williams outlines the “basic legitimation demand,” which is that order be secured in a way that is acceptable to all; with or without this proviso we are back to the need for government, and to the truth of Rawls’s and Nagel’s insight that without government social justice is impossible: moral cosmopolitanism does not provide the basis for a system of global justice.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Given the problems with the discourse outlined above, where does this new offering by Christian Barry and Gerhard Øverland stand? The first thing to be said about *Responding to Global Poverty* is that it is presented in the manner of contemporary analytical political theory. This does not mean that the argument is difficult to understand, but it does mean that

it is squarely geared toward current and aspiring analytical political theorists. Terms are rigorously defined; a distinction is made between “assistance-based responsibilities” (for example, Singer’s argument that if you can help you should) and “contribution-based responsibilities” (for example, Thomas Pogge’s claim that the current rich benefit from the past and present exploitation of the current poor), and narrow distinctions are drawn between doing harm, allowing harm to be done, and enabling harm. Similarly, the costs of action are classified and defined. A great deal of this analysis is not directly related to global justice; for example, the extended discussion of the distinction between doing, allowing, and enabling harm and the defense of the unusual distinction between the latter two categories is conducted by reference to the extensive philosophical literature on the difference between killing and letting die rather than with direct reference to global poverty or inequality. Still, the aim is that, when these distinctions have been clarified, the analysis will illuminate the claims made by Pogge and others, and this aim is, indeed, achieved. Parts I and II, dealing respectively with assistance-based and contribution-based responsibilities, present a concise and well-organized account of the debate on global justice as it has developed over the decades, and will be particularly valuable to student readers as well as those members of the general public who are prepared to go along with the uncompromising style of argumentation.

Less valuable, in my opinion, is the extensive use of hypothetical cases in order to develop the argument. Thus, for example, Pogge’s claim that we are harming the poor if we impose an unjust institutional order upon them—unjust insofar as there is a feasible alternative institutional arrangement that would not harm the poor—is explored via a series of scenarios covering the hypothetical terms of trade between Earth and Venus rather than by investigating actual World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations. Such reasoning is, of course, not unusual; Singer’s original article set out the now famous hypothetical case

concerning the obligations of a passerby who observes that a child is drowning in a shallow pool, and who could save her without sacrificing something of comparable (or perhaps any) moral significance. However, this example was purely illustrative, set in a much wider discursive framework and not crucial to the argument. Barry and Øverland, on the other hand, actually develop their argument by offering a great many such hypotheticals.

This approach relies for its persuasive power on our possessing moral intuitions that tell us how we should behave when faced with a hypothetical case. The most famous such case, known commonly as the “Trolley Problem,” asks whether, in the event we see a train threatening to run into and kill a group of half a dozen people (who for some reason cannot move), we should throw into its path a handy overweight individual whose size would bring the train to a stop at the cost of his life.¹³ If, in fact, as I believe, our moral intuitions have been shaped over time by our encounters with real, as opposed to fanciful, situations, then such cases are of limited value. I have some moral intuitions about how to behave toward someone who is behaving badly or well toward me, but—and here I am speaking for myself, readers may disagree—I have no moral intuitions about what I should do if faced with the Trolley Problem. Runaway trains are not a problem I have encountered in my journey through life, and I have never had to decide between sacrificing one life or allowing six to die; as a result I do not have relevant intuitions to bring to the table. The simplicity of these fanciful cases is supposed to clarify; whereas, by omitting all the nuances, histories, and emotions that accompany actual decisions, such simplicity more plausibly serves to obfuscate.

Returning to matters of substance, it is in Part III of *Responding to Global Poverty*, titled “Implications of Contribution,” that the distinctions among doing, allowing, and enabling harm are employed to take the argument into less familiar, and potentially controversial, territory. The key issue here concerns the extent to which the harm done by the

rich world's imposition of the current, allegedly unjust, global institutional structure on the poor world could justify the use of force in self-defense by the latter against the former. Barry and Øverland reject the proposition that tariffs and subsidies imposed by the rich that contribute to deaths from poverty-related causes constitute killing, but they argue that such policies do more than simply allow avoidable deaths; rather, they enable them. In a striking statistic, —albeit a statistic arrived at by some heroic, and perhaps implausible, assumptions—they assert that the 2.2 billion people who they define as constituting the rich of the world contribute to the death of 3.65 million children every year, or, to put it another way, any group of 602 affluent people contributes to the death of one child each year (p. 177). Much of Part III of the book is devoted to exploring, and for the most part dismissing, the various arguments that might be put forward to avoid the implication that the poor have a right of resistance in the face of this situation. Many of these arguments again draw upon the contemporary literature on “revisionist” just war theory, dealing with matters such as the rights of “innocents,” the relationship between individual and collective responsibility, and so on.¹⁴ Clearly, these are arguments with implications that go a long way beyond what are usually thought of as the problems of global poverty, and I take it that part of the purpose of the book is to persuade the reader that phenomena such as terrorism and asymmetric war cannot be understood except in the wider context of global inequality.

The authors make a strong case for their position, and it is provocative and worthy of consideration. Nevertheless, I see reasons for caution. The first and most obvious point is that it is not quite as clear as the authors assume that the existing global international structure works to disadvantage the poor, at least not to the extent that their arguments rely upon. Certainly, there are some practices legitimized under WTO rules that hurt the poor—such as subsidies to European and American agriculture—but it is also the case that over the last two decades very large numbers of people have been lifted out of poverty by trade conducted

under WTO rules. Scholars such as Paul Collier argue that some five billion people have been or are being lifted out of poverty by the forces unleashed by globalization and institutionalized in bodies such as the International Monetary Fund and the WTO. The most important issue now, he argues, is how to handle the “bottom billion” who have been left behind.¹⁵ Others will have a more jaundiced view of the current global institutional order, but the key point is that by refusing to do more than occasionally nibble at the surface of the very large amount of empirical literature on global poverty and development, the impression is given that the causes of global poverty are now so well established that they do not merit further consideration. This is not the case.

WHOSE AGENCY IS IT ANYWAY?

Perhaps a more important reason to be cautious about the way in which the authors set out their argument concerns the issue of agency. The subtitle of *Responding to Global Poverty is Harm, Responsibility, and Agency*, but the agency in question is solely that of the globally affluent. The authors explicitly tell us throughout the book that their focus is on children precisely to avoid the issue of the agency of the poor: “[children], at least, cannot plausibly be viewed as in any way responsible for their plight” (p. 175). Singer’s “child in the shallow pool” case is, again, chosen for the same reason: we do not need to ask why the child is in the pool. But the global poor collectively are not children, to be deemed incapable of exercising responsibility, and it may well be that the innocent children of poverty have a better case against their own parents than against the globally affluent. It is clear that corruption, political violence, and, generally, bad policy are responsible for many of the problems of the poorest countries, especially of Collier’s bottom billion; and it is also clear that most theorists of global justice are aware that this is so and are nevertheless unwilling to build this

awareness into their theories. Instead, it is more common to explain failures of governance in poor countries as either beyond their control or actually created by the rich.

Consider, for example, the so-called “resource curse,” which inflicts authoritarian governments on countries unlucky enough to possess the kind of raw material endowment that enables their leaders to rule without the level of popular consent that would be required were they to be financed via an effective tax system—a curse that is made operative by the willingness of the wealthy to buy from dictators.¹⁶ The point I want to make here is not that the resource curse does not exist, but that the key intervening variable between raw materials and authoritarian government is political culture. Thus, North Sea oil has not destroyed Norwegian democracy but rather has made possible the most generous welfare state on the planet, whereas the hundreds of billions of dollars in oil revenues that have accrued to Nigeria over the decades have gone into the pockets of a fabulously wealthy elite. Of all the writers on global justice of the last four decades, only John Rawls in his account of the duties of assistance of well-ordered peoples toward the inhabitants of “burdened societies” gives adequate stress to the importance of developing the kind of political culture that would make material wealth a blessing rather than a curse.¹⁷ Rawls perhaps goes too far in suggesting that transfers of wealth are never required, but his basic perspective is better supported by the empirical data on development and aid than is the work of most of his cosmopolitan critics.

Barry and Øverland explore the possibility that the global poor might properly and defensively use force against the globally affluent, but in the real world there is little possibility that such force could be effective in changing policy, whether morally justified or not. Rhetorical flourishes aside, terrorism, most of which, in any case, is not generated by poverty, does not constitute an existential threat to any rich country and historically has never produced the kind of reorientation that the authors think necessary.

In sum, this book has great value as an overview of the global justice literature and as a rigorous exposition of the key categories involved in doing, allowing, and enabling harm. Students of the field or, for that matter, nonstudents who want to know what political theory has to offer on the subject of global poverty, will find *Responding to Global Poverty* invaluable; no better summary of what analytical political theory has to offer is available. But as well as illustrating the best that political theory has to offer, this book also reveals its limits. In shaping our response to global poverty we certainly need the insights of normative political theory, but we also need to be sensitive to the empirical findings and theoretical insights of development economics, political sociology, and international relations. Integrating these various discourses into a coherent approach is a difficult task, but Barry and Øverland take us at least part of the way there.

NOTES

¹ See Brian Barry, “Humanity and Justice in Global Perspective,” in Brian Barry, *Democracy, Power and Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Charles Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations*, 2nd edition (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); Simon Caney, *Justice Beyond Borders* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Thomas Pogge, *Realizing Rawls* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007); John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); John Rawls *Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); and Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972), pp. 229–43.

² There are obvious differences between the issues of global justice, global inequality, and global poverty, but here these terms are used as more or less synonymous unless indicated otherwise.

³ See, most recently, *The Most Good You Can Do* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

⁴ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. The details of this contract, the “veil of ignorance,” and of Rawls’s Law of Peoples need not concern us here. Interested readers may refer to Chris Brown, “John Rawls, ‘The Law of Peoples,’ and International Political Theory,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 14, no. 1 (2000), pp. 125–32.

⁵ For an elaboration of this position, see Huw Lloyd Williams, *On Rawls, Development and Global Justice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁶ Pogge, *Realizing Rawls*.

⁷ Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations*.

⁸ Barry, *Democracy, Power and Justice*.

⁹ Charles Beitz, “Cosmopolitan Ideals and National Sentiment,” *Journal of Philosophy* 80, no. 10 (1983), pp. 591–600; and Onora O’Neill, *Bounds of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*.

¹¹ Thomas Nagel, “The Problem with Global Justice,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 33, no. 2 (2005), pp. 113–47.

¹² Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), ch. 1.

¹³ David Edmonds, *Would You Kill the Fat Man? The Trolley Problem and What Your Answer Tells Us about Right and Wrong* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

¹⁴ For a key text on revisionist just war theory, see Jeff McMahan, *Killing in War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done about It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁶ See, for example, Leif Wenar, “Property Rights and the Resource Curse,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 36, no. 1 (2008), pp. 2–32.

¹⁷ See Huw Lloyd Williams, *On Rawls, Development and Global Justice*.