What do the affluent owe the global poor, an introduction

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ABSTRACT
This paper provides an introduction to the special issue on Christian Barry and Gerhard Øverland’s book ‘Responding to Global Poverty’. The issue includes eight critical essays, a precis of the book and a response to critics by Barry.

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Christian Barry and Gerhard Øverland’s Responding to Global Poverty makes an original and significant contribution to debates on global justice and moral philosophy more generally. Barry and Øverland propose a systematic framework for thinking about duties owed to the global poor. Along the way they develop innovative accounts of a number of important theoretical issues in normative ethics: the moral significance of doing, allowing, and enabling harm; the treatment of overdetermined harm; how the failure to meet assistance-based responsibilities can increase one’s responsibilities after the fact; what the poor are permitted to do in pursuit of just treatment; and much more.

Broadly speaking, Barry and Øverland take there to be two bases for assigning responsibility to redress global poverty: agents’ duty to assist those in serious need whom they can help and agents’ duty to compensate people when they have contributed to harming those people. The first basis parallels Peter Singer’s claim that we are as responsible to take on costs in response to global poverty as we would be to take on costs in order to rescue a drowning child we came across. The second basis is associated with Thomas Pogge’s arguments that affluent countries impose the harm of poverty on the poor. But while Barry and Øverland believe that thinkers who have developed these lines of thought have identified plausible bases for the responsibility to address poverty, they also believe that the existing proposals are flawed. And their book’s principle objective is to identify more plausible ways to ground responsibility for global poverty in agents’ capacity for assistance or relationship to unjust harm. They argue that while the two bases generate different responsibilities, both suggest that most individuals and governments ought to be doing considerably more to remedy global poverty than they are doing now.

The breadth of issues touched on by the responses in this issue is a testament to the ambition of Responding to Global Poverty. But the responses can be classified into three
broad groups. Pieces by Bashshar Haydar, Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, and Laura Valentini criticize Barry and Øverland’s claims about duties of assistance. Work by Siba Harb and R.J. Leland, and Fiona Woollard looks into Barry and Øverland’s account of the nature of contribution-based responsibilities. Responses by Susanne Burri and Lars Christie, Holly Lawford-Smith, and Anne Polkamp discuss some of the implications of Barry and Øverland’s views on responsibilities for global harms. Below we say something brief about each piece and its relationship to Barry and Øverland’s arguments in Responding to Global Poverty.

A moderate principle of assistance?

Barry and Øverland argue for a moderate principle of assistance: ‘If we can prevent something (very) bad from happening at relatively modest cost to ourselves and others, then we ought to do it.’ This moderate principle is significantly weaker than Singer’s principle of assistance, which requires that when we can prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought to do so.

Both Lippert-Rasmussen and Haydar suggest that Barry and Øverland fail to successfully defend their moderate principle as superior to Singer’s. In their pieces Lippert-Rasmussen and Haydar suggest that the cases which Barry and Øverland appeal to do not actually support a moderate principle of assistance over Singer’s more demanding principle. Lippert-Rasmussen also criticizes the rationale that Barry and Øverland offer in support of their moderate principle: that it balances the moral equality of persons against their interest in governing their own lives. He points out that the idea of moral equality does not arbitrate between more and less stringent principles. And Haydar questions Barry and Øverland’s claim that we cannot demand from others to make great sacrifices in order to help people in need, unless we are willing to compensate them for their potential loss.

Valentini is more sympathetic to Barry and Øverland’s moderate principle, but she questions their largely case-based method of arguing for the principle. Reflection on cases is insufficient, according to Valentini, because it fails to give a basis for deciding which costs are moderate, and thereby such that we can expect individuals to take them on in order to prevent very great harm to another, and which costs go beyond the moderate standard, such that we cannot expect individuals to pay them. She thinks that considering duties of assistance within a broader distinction between duties of assistance and duties of justice allows us to make headway on this problem (a distinction that Barry and Øverland seem to want to do without). Valentini argues that duties of assistance reference subjective metrics of costs, whereas duties of justice use an objective metric for determining what costs are moderate.

Do the affluent harm the poor?

The second basis for assigning responsibility to alleviate global poverty appeals to the requirement that agents compensate those whom they have exposed to wrongful harm. If affluent people have caused some of the harms of global poverty, then they must take on some cost to compensate victims of their actions. Barry and Øverland are skeptical of the claim that the affluent straightforwardly cause the harms of global poverty. But they are sympathetic to two related claims: that the affluent exploit those afflicted by
global poverty, and that the affluent enable (rather than cause) harm to the global poor. The response by Siba Harb and R.J. Leland weighs in on the point about exploitation, whereas Fiona Woollard’s response takes issue with Barry and Øverland’s distinction between doing and enabling harm.

Harb and Leland consider whether exploitation itself might sometimes be conceived as a kind of harm. They argue that in cases where the exploitation imposes choices between (1) satisfying one’s own basic needs or the basic needs of one’s dependents, and (2) denigrating oneself or one’s dependents, this imposition can plausibly be regarded as causing harm. This is true despite the fact that the exploitation leaves the exploited party better off than she would’ve been had the exploiter not interacted with her. Then they explore how this result might be used to rehabilitate a harm-based account of the duty of exploiters’ responsibilities to respond to global poverty.

As we have already mentioned, Barry and Øverland think the affluent have contribution-based duties to the globally disadvantaged in virtue of enabling some of the harm associated with poverty. Woollard raises a number of issues with Barry and Øverland’s account of enabling harm she claims need to be resolved if it is to be able to play the role they want it to. She points out that their distinction between doing, enabling, and allowing harm employs a notion of ‘relevant action’ that is under-defined. She claims that it relies on an idea of energy transfer that is overly narrow. And she argues that whether agents enable or allow harm when they remove barriers protecting those agents from harm can depend on whether the agents exposed to harm have a normative claim to the barriers in question. The result is that the distinction between enabling and allowing is more normatively loaded than Barry and Øverland suggest. And this suggests that whether the affluent contribute to harming the poor when they remove protective mechanisms may depend on whether the poor have a prior normative claim to those protections.

**Contribution to global harms and enforceability**

The harms associated with some global problems, such as climate change, are overdetermined: each individual can claim, with apparent plausibility, that she doesn’t cause the relevant harm, since her actions don’t make any morally significant difference to whether the bad outcome eventuates. This creates a problem for extending Barry and Øverland’s contribution-based responsibilities to some of the more urgent cases of global harm. Barry and Øverland offer an explanation for why agents have reason not to contribute even in cases where their actions won’t make the harmful outcome worse: agents should refrain because they might be part of the set of causal factors that actually brings about the harmful outcome. Anne Polkamp takes Barry and Øverland’s approach to have significant advantages over some other recent responses to overdetermination of harm. But she argues that Barry and Øverland’s view on overdetermined harm is nonetheless unsuccessful, because it fails to give agents reasons not to overdetermine harm in some important cases. Polkamp also argues that Barry and Øverland lack an explanation of the moral significance of being in the set of causal factors that actually determine some harmful outcome. She thinks that a more successful analysis of reasons against overdetermination would need to explain why being in the actual set is morally
serious or appeal to alternative considerations that are more morally serious and that speak against overdetermining harm.

Throughout *Responding To Global Poverty*, Barry and Øverland discuss the obligations that the affluent have to address the harms of poverty. Holly Lawford-Smith points out that this talk of ‘the affluent’ is ambiguous. Do Barry and Øverland’s arguments apply to individual rich people, to rich people as a whole (taken as an unorganized aggregate), or to rich countries (perhaps together with other organizations or institutions in the global domain, such as multinational firms or NGOs)? She argues that while a few of Barry and Øverland’s arguments will generate obligations for rich individuals, many of the arguments only plausibly apply to countries and institutions. And she claims that it is difficult to derive individual responsibilities from these responsibilities borne by countries and institutions.

Susanne Burri and Lars Christie take up a different issue: the question of whether we should treat failures to fulfill assistance-based responsibilities differently from failures to fulfill contribution-based responsibilities. In particular they ask whether these two types of duties are enforceable in the same way. Burri and Christie take Barry and Øverland to be ambiguous on this point. It’s commonly held that there is an asymmetry between the two sets of responsibilities: whereas it’s permissible to force someone to compensate those whom they’ve contributed to harming, it is impermissible to force them to assist those whom they’re obligated to help, in virtue of their having the capacity to help. But Burri and Christie argue for symmetry with respect to enforceability: assistance-based responsibilities are as enforceable as contribution-based responsibilities. They claim that the most plausible basis for asymmetry, with respect to enforcement, is an appeal to autonomy, but seek to show that this appeal does not support asymmetry. Moreover, they argue that the rationale that supports the enforceability of contribution-based responsibilities – the idea that the distribution of burdens following enforcement is the least unjust available distribution – equally supports the enforceability of assistance-based responsibilities.

In addition to the eight critical essays, this special issue includes a precis of the book and a reply to critics by Christian Barry. We hope that the authors’ critical engagement with Barry and Øverland’s wonderful book will advance and enrich our understanding of the responsibilities of affluent to the poor and of contemporary global ethics more broadly.

Sadly, Gerhard Øverland passed away in September of 2014 after a brief and brave struggle with cancer. To all those who had the chance to know him, either professionally or personally, Gerhard was a highly original philosopher, and an exceptionally genuine person with a great sense of humor. He will be deeply missed.