Are ‘the affluent’ responsible for global poverty?

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ABSTRACT

According to Christian Barry & Gerhard Øverland (2016), there are multiple ways “the affluent” might be morally responsible for the situation the global poor are in, including having failed to assist them on a single occasion or on multiple occasions; by enabling harm to them; by ‘giving rise to cost’ for them; by making it costly for the poor to escape their own suffering; by exploiting them; by overdetermining harm to them. But what exactly is this group, “the affluent”, who Barry and Øverland present as being capable of doing all these things? In this paper I present three possible conceptions of ‘the affluent’, and argue that they all create problems for the conclusions the authors want to reach.

In Responding to Global Poverty (2016), Christian Barry & Gerhard Øverland cover no less than six ways that the affluent might have moral responsibility for the plight of the global poor. They can (i) fail to assist the poor on a single occasion (Chapter 2); (ii) fail to assist the poor on multiple occasions, with effects that compound over time (Chapter 3); (iii) enable harm to the poor (Chapter 5); give rise to cost for the poor, by doing something that makes it more costly for the poor to escape their own suffering (Chapter 6); exploit the poor (Chapter 7); and overdetermine harm to the poor (Chapter 11). While their typological analysis is admirably thorough, Barry & Øverland are unclear on the question of who it is that has moral responsibility for poverty in one or more of these ways. In this brief discussion piece, my aim is to get a little clearer on the agency aspect of responsibility for poverty. I shall present three candidates for ‘the affluent’, all consistent with what Barry & Øverland say in the book, and argue that they all create problems for the conclusions the authors want to reach.

Let’s start with global poverty, so that we have a handle on what it is we’re interested in responsibility for. Poverty consists primarily in a person’s lacking sufficient financial or material resources to meet her basic needs. It may involve insufficient or unreliable access to any or all of clean drinking water, nutritious food, warm and dry shelter, clothing and footwear, functional sanitation, healthcare, and basic medication. We can ask about responsibility for poverty holistically described, i.e. global poverty at its most general, or we can ask about the poverty experienced by a particular individual. Moral responsibility for each of these will work quite differently, because causal implication in the former is a lot more complicated than causal implication in the latter. In this discussion, I’m interested...
exclusively in backward-looking responsibility. Causal implication is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for backward-looking moral responsibility. I’ll assume, minimally, that control is the further condition that secures sufficiency (see further discussion in Lawford-Smith 2015). What we need to know now is who causes, and has control over causing, global poverty (on either the holistic or specific description).

We can start by asking who Barry & Øverland take it to be. Their book is peppered with casual reference to ‘the affluent’. It shows up four times on the back cover, seven times on p. 2, and 129 times across the book (assuming that my auto-count is correct). But who, or what, exactly is the affluent? Take the group of countries less that 2% of whose population live on less than $2 per day. In 2009, that was: Australia, Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Iran, Italy, Malaysia, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, USA, Uruguay, Ukraine, and the UK (UNHDR 2009).

Exclude the relevant less-than-2% of these populations who themselves count as poor on the less-than-$2-per-day understanding. This gives us a large group of people that could conceivably be described as ‘the affluent’. But do Barry & Øverland mean to pick out each individual person who counts as affluent? Or they mean the group of all such individuals? If the latter, do they have in mind the whole group, uncoordinated as it is, or do they mean to pick out coordinated groups that contain affluent individuals as members, for example affluent countries, or affluent corporations? (From here on I’ll talk about countries alone, rather than giving a separate discussion of corporations and other kinds of international institutions: countries are the hardest case so the conclusions will generalize).

Barry & Øverland are unfortunately ambiguous on this point. It sometimes seems that they have the uncoordinated group in mind, for example: ‘the affluent may indeed enable poverty abroad through policies and institutions for which they can be held responsible’ (2016, 2), or ‘if we and other affluent people stopped contributing significantly, fewer children would die of poverty-related causes each day’ (176). An individual alone cannot usually make a difference to policies and institutions, but together with sufficiently many others she can; and similarly, individuals together could significantly affect the number of children that die every day. In other parts of the book, it seems to be individual countries that are their focus, for example in one of the hypothetical cases in Chapter 7: ‘Affluent launches a sustained military attack on Developing’, and ‘Affluent pollutes the ocean. Health problems […] cause further deterioration in the living standards of Developing’s people’ (125). And in yet other parts of the book, it seems to be that each individual affluent person is implicated in the plight of the poor. For example, they talk about ‘relatively affluent individuals’ (1), ‘relatively affluent people’ (ibid), and ‘ordinary affluent people’ (6, 14, 50, 52, 54, & 185).

Let’s work through how plausible their arguments would be on each of these interpretations of ‘the affluent’. Combining the three interpretations of ‘the affluent’ together with the six ways of being morally responsible for global poverty gives us the $3 \times 6$ matrix in Table 1. We can fill any given cell with a ‘Y’ (for ‘yes’) or an ‘N’ (for

| Failure to assist | Compounded failure to assist | Enabling harm | Giving rise to cost for Exploiting | Overdetermining harm |
|------------------|-----------------------------|---------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|
| Group of all affluent individuals | Any affluent individual | Any affluent country | | |
‘no’) depending on the plausibility of the combination. It is worth noting that the causation involved in any such combination – e.g. one affluent individual’s exploitation of an individual poor person – can be either direct or indirect. When it is direct, it runs from the affluent individual to the poor person. When it is indirect it runs through intermediaries, such as the affluent individual’s state, corporation, international institution, etc. In Table 2 this is represented where the answers differ by ordered Y/N pairs.

I’ve said already that backward-looking moral responsibility requires, at minimum, causation plus control. This means we can knock out the whole top row. All of the six ways of being morally responsible for poverty involve exercises of agency, which the unorganized group of all affluent individuals doesn’t possess (Lawford-Smith 2015). Consider Barry & Øverland’s modified ‘moderate’ formulation of Peter Singer’s principle of assistance: ‘if we can prevent something (very) bad from happening at relatively moderate cost to ourselves, and others, then we ought to do it’ (2016, 14). Or, consider their statement of what it takes to be an enabler of harm: ‘relevant action without continuous causal process (including the creation of an obstacle)’ (89). Or again, their formulation of what it takes to exploit the poor: ‘the exploiter presents the agent in need with another option’ (137), where this option is better than the agent’s default option, but it is not a ‘minimally fair option’ (140). To assess whether a prevention comes at moderate cost, to prevent something, to create an obstacle or undertake an action, or to present another agent with an option that is not minimally fair, all require a level of coordination, and indeed the capacity to act intentionally, that uncoordinated groups simply do not possess.

Let me explain one such cell in more detail to make the objection clearer. Take the combination of the uncoordinated group and exploitation of the global poor (top row, fifth column). To exploit either ‘the poor’ generally, or a particular poor person, one needs to present an agent with an option that is better than her – or their – default option, and yet not minimally fair. This presupposes the capacity to discriminate between minimally fair and not minimally fair options, and the capacity to present other agents with options of either kind. But the uncoordinated group of affluent individuals, taken as a group, doesn’t have either capacity. It might cause agents to have a worse set of options than they might otherwise have had, because the cumulative effects of many uncoordinated individuals’ actions can have a negative impact (e.g. negative externalities like deforestation, fisheries collapse, and climate change). This is true whether we’re interested in direct or indirect action. Intermediaries may be morally responsible for the impacts upon the global poor, but this only implicates the affluent (understood as an uncoordinated group) if they are morally responsible in turn for what the intermediary does. Again, they might cause it, but they lack the capacity to more than merely cause it.

| Table 2. | Failure to assist | Compounded failure to assist | Enabling harm | Giving rise to cost for Exploiting | Overdetermining harm |
|---------|------------------|-----------------------------|--------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|
| Aggregate of all affluent individuals | N | N | N | N | N |
| (One) affluent individual | N | N | Y | Y | Y |
| (One) affluent country | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |

N = no, Y = yes, Y/N & N/Y = direct/indirect
Some writers in the collective responsibility literature have argued that uncoordinated groups can be morally responsible for what they cause, either because responsibility is ‘shared’ between members rather than held by the group (Schwenkenbecher 2014; Bjornsson 2014); or because it is members who bear the ultimate burden of discharging the group’s responsibility, and so members alone that are subject to capacity requirements (Wringe 2014); or because holding groups responsible when they are not coordinated can have the positive effect of ‘responsibilizing’ them for the future (Pettit 2001). I do not have the space to address all of these proposals here, but I make the case against the obligations of uncoordinated groups in detail elsewhere (Lawford-Smith 2015). With the first candidate understanding of ‘the affluent’ knocked out, we’re left with two: any given affluent country, and any given affluent individual. Do either of these fare better?

Let’s take any given affluent individual first, and start with direct harms. It does seem to be true that an affluent individual can fail to assist an individual poor person, say by not making a direct cash transfer when she could do so at moderate cost to herself. Barry & Øverland think such duties compound by raising the cost the assister is required to take on over time (2016, 46–48). But because duties of assistance are not directed – they are owed to some number of people, rather than to specific people – it’s hard to see how failures to assist can compound over time. An affluent individual will rarely if ever enable harm to an individual poor person. Even if what she does intersects with what others do in a way that has the effect of enabling harm to the poor, this doesn’t suffice to her enabling harm to the poor (they do, taken together, but she doesn’t). For the same reason, any given affluent individual will rarely if ever give rise to cost for a particular poor person, exploit a particular poor person, or over-determine harm to a particular poor person. This may seem unintuitive at first; after all, doesn’t any given consumer exploit the labour of a poor person when she buys high street clothing produced in sweatshops? Doesn’t she overdetermine harm to those same workers when she makes a purchase from a shop once the relevant reordering threshold has already been crossed—because all the purchases together can be seen as contributing a kind of share to the reordering going ahead? At least from a consequentialist perspective, the answer is ‘no’: she doesn’t make a difference (Kagan 2011; Glover and Scott-Taggart 1975; although cf. Lawford-Smith 2016, where I argue she has at least a positive expectation of making a difference). The exploiters are those companies and corporations who own sweatshops and employ their workers. Individual consumers making purchases can be at most complicit in this injustice (see further discussion in Lawford-Smith 2018). When it comes to individual affluent people being directly morally responsible for the plight of individual poor people, the most we can say is that there can be a failure to assist. That’s a positive answer in one cell out of six.

What about indirect harms, such as an individual affluent person having an effect on the global trade rules, or on her country’s subsidy and tariff policies? It is extremely unlikely that any one individual could have an effect on the global trade rules. A collective action problem arises at that point, because the action taken by her along with many others might stand a chance of having an effect, but action by her alone is extraordinarily unlikely to (unless, perhaps, she is a very prominent or influential person). It is also unlikely, but comparatively much less so, that any one individual could have an effect on her country’s subsidy and tariff policies. But an impassioned
individual might start a social movement, might lobby her MP, might gather people to her cause, *might* find a way to have an impact. So, we should not rule this out.

Still, indirect implication of the individual in global poverty doesn’t happen in all the six ways Barry & Øverland identify. An affluent individual may enable harm to the poor by not taking political action against her country’s extant subsidies and tariffs, and she may overdetermine harm to the poor for the same reason along with her inactive fellow co-nationals. But it’s hard to make sense of failure to assist, compounded failure to assist, giving rise to cost, or exploiting through her not taking action against her country’s subsidy and tariff policies. (It might be tempting to think she fails to assist the poor, indirectly, by failing to put political pressure on her government to assist them. This is unlikely in large democracies that lack a deliberative culture, where any individual has infinitesimally small influence over political outcomes. See further discussion in Collins & Lawford-Smith 2018). We get one direct ‘yes’ answer and two indirect ‘yes’ answers out of interpreting ‘the affluent’ to mean ‘any given affluent individual’. It’s something, but it falls far short of vindicating all six of Barry & Øverland’s categories.

Countries do the best across the board. *Australia* is an affluent country, and it seems that we can make sense of the idea of Australia being responsible for the poverty caused by its subsidy and tariff policies, and for the poverty caused by the international trade rules imposed by itself and other countries. Australia can fail to assist the poor by failing to change these rules; the failure can compound over time because those made poor by the rules can become exponentially worse off as an effect; Australia can enable harm to the poor by clearing the way for the rules other countries prefer to have a negative impact on the poor; it can give rise to cost by leaving those particular rules in place which makes it harder for the poor to escape their own situation unilaterally; it can exploit the poor by offering the poor unfair trade terms instead of minimally fair ones; and finally Australia can overdetermine harm to the poor by agreeing to global trade rules, together with other countries, that make the poor worse off than they otherwise would have been. No particular country can really be charged with responsibility for global poverty holistically described (it’s not as though if one country radically reformed its trade rules, poverty would disappear), but countries can certainly be tied in causal terms to poverty for particular people in particular places (for example, where corporations registered in those countries operate sweatshops). We can say the same thing about corporations and other kinds of international institutions (for a summary of conclusions, see Table 2).

This is somewhat revisionary of Barry & Øverland’s usage, because talking about the way ‘the affluent’ fail to assist the poor, etc. is elliptical at best if what they mean is that ‘Australia’ or ‘Canada’ and so on fail to assist the poor, etc. Perhaps they had the group of all affluent people in mind and simply overlooked the fact that this group is not an appropriate subject of moral praise and blame. In any case, even if we go with the ‘countries’ interpretation of the relevant agents, we still have a problem, which is to explain who (if anyone) is implicated in countries’ responsibility. Countries are (or at least can be) complicated collective agents, and so merely showing that they’re implicated in harm doesn’t yet establish how to hold them responsible for that harm (Lawford-Smith & Collins, 2017). Assume as per the preceding discussion that Australia is responsible as a collective agent for its implication in global poverty.
Aren’t citizens responsible for what their countries do? And if so, doesn’t this give us an easy way to get back to individual affluent people being implicated in global poverty after all?

I think it doesn’t, for the following reason, which can be made clearest by focusing on the effect of the international trade rules. Of all the individual citizens of Australia, only some can perform actions that have any effect at all on the global trade rules. Children and adolescents under the age of 18 cannot vote, and neither can resident non-citizens. Of those who can vote, only some will vote along with the majority, which is the group whose combined actions determine the government’s policy (and this is assuming that the various parties running for office actually have an explicit stance on the way they’ll lobby for reform to the international trade rules, which is a pretty major assumption). Of those who vote along with the majority, only some proportion of these will have been necessary to seeing the winning party elected (usually, not all votes for the winning party are causally necessary to electing that party as government).

So first, there’s the chance of any individual being a member of the set of individual citizens who were causally relevant in electing the country’s government. But second, there’s the chance that the country itself is causally relevant in deciding the international trade rules (or reform to them)! (as indicated below). Many more countries than Australia are involved in this decision, and it may turn out that although an individual was efficacious in electing a party with a terrible platform on international trade, her country was not efficacious in preventing reform to the international trade rules.

Voters – > national governments – > international trade rules

There are collective action and coordination problems at both stages of this process. Thus, if we were interested in finding a way to implicate ordinary affluent individuals in the effects of the international trade rules on global poverty, we’d have to run the conditional probabilities: the probability of the individual being a member of the set of individuals who cause their state’s position vis a vis the international trade rules, multiplied by the probability of their state being a member of the set of states who cause the international trade rules to remain, or become, a certain way. But multiplying the probabilities, as low as they potentially were alone, reduces further the overall probability of an individual being implicated. So we either have to stick with countries but tell a different story about what their involvement in global poverty means for their citizens (see e.g. Stilz 2011; Pasternak 2013), or we have to go back to the drawing board in figuring out the best way to think about who’s implicated in global poverty.

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