

Duties and Poverty

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Biosketch

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on the question of who has duties regarding poverty and what those duties demand, from within the perspective of contemporary analytic normative philosophy. The chapter is structured in three sections. Section 1 considers the duties of those living in poverty, which might be either self-regarding or other-regarding duties, and which must be tempered by concerns of overdemandingness. Section 2 considers the duties of affluent individuals. These

are imperfect duties grounded in affluent individuals' relations to the structures that produce poverty: relations of contribution, benefit, and ability to change. Section 3 considers duties of collective agents – including states, for-profits, charities, and civil society groups. The poverty-related duties of these collective agents are sometimes perfect and sometimes imperfect, and include both primary and secondary duties, and both positive and negative duties.

Keywords

Duties; poverty; structural injustice; collective duties; overdemandingness

Introduction

Discussions of poverty tend to contain an implicit imperative: something must be done. A natural question arises: *who* must do something and *what* must they do? This is the question of *poverty duties*: the question of who has duties regarding poverty and what those duties demand. The present chapter examines this question, from within the perspective of contemporary analytic normative philosophy. To be sure, this perspective has many limitations—not least, the homogenous and affluent backgrounds of the vast majority of its contributors, and their lack of experience in actual poverty reduction. But, for better or worse, this is the dominant perspective in the western philosophical academy, so a perspective that must be reckoned with. While acknowledging the limitations of this approach for guiding specific agents ‘on the ground,’ this chapter will answer the question of poverty duties at a general level of abstraction. That is, rather than discussing specific interventions or specific agents in specific contexts, the concern will be with what *kinds of agents* might have duties concerning poverty (and why), and what *kinds of actions* those duties might demand (and why).

The issue of duties has not always been in the forefront of the minds of contemporary analytic normative philosophers working on poverty. As recently as 2005, it was a substantive contribution for Onora O’Neill (2005) to point out that any useful discussion of poverty must grapple with the question of which agents have duties to address poverty. This chapter is animated by this question, and addresses it with the following assumptions in place: that duties can belong only to *agents* (not to ‘humanity’ or ‘the wealthy’ or ‘the international community’); that duties must *guide* agents by demanding actions of them; and that the demanded actions must be within the agents’ *abilities* (that is, ‘duty’ implies ‘ability’ – a more specific variant of the general idea that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’).

More generally, I will assume that a duty is a presumptively decisive reason for action by an agent. When I say a duty is ‘presumptively decisive,’ I mean that it would take extreme extenuating circumstances for it to be permissible for a duty-bearing agent not to act upon the duty – and, even in these extreme extenuating circumstances, a moral ‘remainder’ or ‘taint’ would be left by the agent’s unfulfillment of the duty. The ‘taint’ or ‘remainder’ will usually generate a new duty for the agent, such as a duty to apologise, atone, or otherwise repair for the fact that the agent did not perform their initial duty. Duties can be stronger or weaker than each other, but (I will assume) they all have a sufficient level of strength to be presumptively decisive. By ‘stronger or weaker,’ I mean that some duties (stronger ones) can be overridden only by the most extreme of extenuating circumstances; while other duties (weaker ones) are more easily overridden (including being overridden by stronger duties). I will treat as equivalent cases in which (i) a duty is overridden and therefore non-existent and (ii) a duty is overridden and therefore excused yet still existent. In both (i) and (ii), a moral remainder arises. These assumptions are of course questionable, but space constraints preclude in-depth discussion.

I will further assume that the above picture of duties can be operationalised from within a range of different normative theories. Perhaps most obviously, duties are the bread-and-butter of deontologists. But consequentialists, virtue ethicists, care ethicists, and others can (I will assume) assert the existence of duties, in the sense just outlined. For consequentialists, duties will be asserted because following duties is an ‘indirect’ or ‘sophisticated’ way of producing the best consequences (Railton 1984). For virtue ethicists, duties will be asserted as the best way to cultivate or enact virtue (thus duties can be understood as what Rosalind Hursthouse (1999) called ‘v-rules’: the rules of virtue ethics, such as a duty to do what a courageous person would do). For care ethicists, duties will arise in cases where there is an imperative to provide care (in my favoured version of care ethics, such an imperative arises when one party is dependent on another for the fulfilment of an important interest (Collins 2015)). In this way, duties are a highly versatile tool in our moral armoury, to be wielded by theorists of different stripes.

I will further assume that the duties related to poverty run the gamut of moral, social, and political philosophy. The theories just mentioned are, of course, normative *ethical* theories. But within normative *political* theories, duties concerning poverty might be incorporated in a number of different ways. Duties concerning poverty might be understood as ‘natural duties of justice’ belonging to individuals: duties held by individuals that require the individuals to work towards bringing about just (particularly, poverty-ending) institutional arrangements where there are none (Rawls (1971, 293) – though Rawls did not relate duties of justice to poverty specifically). Or, still from within political philosophy, duties concerning poverty might be understood as duties that correlate with *human rights*. Duties that correlate with human rights are often thought to belong to states in the first instance, with other agents (including, perhaps, individuals) serving a ‘back-up’ role (Nickel 1993).

Duties regarding poverty might instead fall under the purview of *social* philosophy, where this is understood as examining the ‘meso’ level between the ‘micro’ level of individuals and the ‘macro’ level of formal political institutions. In their social guise, duties regarding poverty might demand that individuals act to change social norms or expectations. Alternatively, duties regarding poverty might demand that non-state actors (such as firms or charities) act to address the poverty experienced by their workers, clients, or stakeholders; here, the duties blur the line between the social and the political.

In what follows, I will assume that ‘duties’ arise throughout the moral, social, and political spheres – and that all of the duties just mentioned are plausible candidates for poverty-regarding duties. That said, I will put aside the legal sphere: I will be concerned with duties that are philosophically justified, not with duties that are legally justified; and I will not be concerned only with duties that are apt to be enforced by laws, but also with duties that might be enforced by interpersonal blame or censure, or by the agent’s own conscience.

The chapter is structured in three sections. In Section 1, I consider duties of those living in poverty. While it might seem wrong to attribute poverty-related *duties* to those whose lives are constrained by poverty, I will draw on recent debates to suggest a balance must be struck between avoiding over-demandingness and drawing on the situated knowledge of those who are affected by injustice. In Section 2, I consider the standard duty-bearers within analytic moral philosophy: affluent individuals. I point to several different grounds for the duties of these individuals. I draw on recent work on structural injustice to consider what actions might be demanded of affluent individuals. Finally, in Section 3, I consider duties of collective agents – including states, for-profits, charities, and civil society groups. States are a fairly ‘traditional’ bearer of duties concerning poverty. This is in large part due to poverty’s role in the unfulfillment of socioeconomic human rights, where human rights are conceptualised as generating duties primarily for states. I suggest that other collective agents also enjoy the kind

of moral agency that enables them to bear duties. I suggest that considerations of stability, accountability, and legitimacy (which speak in favour of states' duties) must be balanced against considerations of complicity and motivation (which speak in favour of duties for other collective agents, at least in certain contexts and as a bridge to states' duties).

Duties of Those Living in Poverty

When considering the topic of duties and poverty, it has been typical in contemporary analytic moral philosophy to focus on the duties of those agents are not themselves in poverty—whether these agents are individuals, states, non-governmental organisations, or others. But recently there has been a trend away from this, in the form of a more general debate about whether victims of injustice have duties to resist. This debate has not focused on poverty specifically, but many of the arguments carry over to poverty.

For example, Carol Hay (2011) provides a Kantian argument that victims of oppression have self-regarding duties to resist oppression, grounded in the more general duty to respect and protect one's own rational nature. Building on Hay, we might point out that poverty harms one's rational nature in numerous ways: it inhibits one's capacity to set ends for oneself, to make a free choice between different ends, to pursue those ends robustly, and so on. In these ways, the duties of impoverished people to work towards ending poverty might be *self-regarding* duties of a Kantian kind.

Alternatively, such duties might instead be *other-regarding*: they might be owed not to oneself, but to other people living in poverty. Here, we can draw on the work of Ashwini Vasanthakumar (2018), who argues that victims of oppression are epistemically privileged with respect to their oppression: they are uniquely well-placed to articulate the ways in which their oppression is wrong and what might helpfully be done to alleviate it. Such people are therefore uniquely well-placed use their particular knowledge to assist *other* victims who suffer the same

form of oppression, Vasanthakumar argues. Again, such a line of reasoning extends from oppression in general to poverty specifically: those living in poverty are often uniquely well-placed to guide its remedy (Deveaux 2015). Insofar as other impoverished people would benefit from the exercise of this ability, the unique capacity of impoverished people generates an other-regarding duty.

If those living in poverty can be seen as duty-bearers, then what might be the *content* of their duties? Importantly, this question is not just asking what impoverished people might have a *right* (permission) to do. The question is asking what they might have a *duty* (requirement) to do. As Hickey et al point out, those who are victims of injustice more generally might perform various actions:

They may, for instance, play particular roles in agenda setting, or in building sufficient support to pressure policy-makers into action. They may help to shift the ‘Overton window’, or awaken our moral imaginations to previously uncredited possibilities; or serve as a voice of conscience to signal when societal developments are moving in the wrong direction. ... It may even be that political philosophers should at times *defer* to such agents on account of, for instance, their local epistemic expertise or the ways in which their agency is or will be implicated in protest action. (Hickey et al forthcoming, 5)

While Hickey et al (like Hay and Vasanthakumar) are talking about victims of injustice or oppression in general, these points also apply to the specific case of poverty. That is, people living in poverty are in a unique epistemic position – and a unique position of credibility – with regard to the prospects for some of the mechanisms for ending poverty. Of course, this is not true of all impoverished people all the time. But it may be true often enough that, in some cases, it produces a *duty* to act from this epistemic position – whether that duty is conceptualized as a duty to oneself or as a duty to other impoverished people.

Nonetheless, there are powerful objections to the idea that impoverished people have duties to work towards ending poverty. Here again, the discussion of poverty can draw upon discussions of the more general idea that victims of injustice have duties to work towards ending that injustice. Speaking about the case of racial oppression, Tommy Shelby argues that blacks in the USA are not under duties of justice to play a role in ameliorating racial injustice (2016, 57-76). Shelby's argument is complex, but a recurring point is that any purported duty would demand too much of blacks. In the case of extreme poverty, the point is perhaps even clearer: a duty to resist one's poverty might (in cases where powerful agents refuse to listen) amount to a duty to protest, strike, or revolt. This would be far too much to ask: it would, in the short-term at least, be likely to push one further into poverty, thereby positively undermining the very goal of the duty (if it is understood as a duty to oneself) or preventing one from being able to effectively act upon that duty in future (if the duty is understood as a duty owed to others).

Thus, a balance must be struck between, on the one hand, reaping the benefits of the situated knowledge of those who are affected by poverty and, on the other hand, avoiding overly demanding or even self-defeating duties. While those living in poverty are important agents of poverty reduction, the balance of considerations suggests that the full picture of the *duties* of poverty will inevitably include other agents. Most obviously, it will include other agents' duties to ask and hear impoverished people for their views on potential mechanisms for ending poverty, thereby reducing the costs to impoverished people of expressing their views and having their views be efficacious. In the coming sections, I consider duties of other agents more systemically.

Affluent Individuals' Duties

The question of affluent individuals' duties regarding poverty goes back centuries. Perhaps most famously in the western tradition, Immanuel Kant posited an imperfect duty of beneficence, on the basis that we cannot rationally will a maxim of never helping anyone (Kant 2011, 4:423¹). Later, W.D. Ross incorporated a similar duty of beneficence into his intuitionistic approach to duty. This was a duty to foster others' health, security, wisdom, moral goodness, and happiness – on the basis that “there are other beings in the world whose condition we can make better in respect of virtue, or of intelligence, or of pleasure” (Ross 2002, 21-22). We need not embrace Ross's perfectionism about welfare to agree that an intuitionistic approach to duties would incorporate an imperfect duty to work toward an absence of poverty.

Contemporary philosophers debate exactly what it means to say that a duty is 'imperfect,' particularly in the Kantian sense (Rainbolt 2000; Hope 2014). Very roughly, we can think of imperfect duties as having all three of the following properties. First, they are insatiable: there is no point at which the duty is 'fulfilled'; instead, the duty requires ongoing action and attention (I assume this feature applies to poverty from the perspective of each duty-bearer taken individually, since no duty-bearer taken individually could act to eradicate poverty). Second, imperfect duties do not correlate with rights: the duty is owed to no one in particular (nor is it owed to every person). By this, I mean that there is no identifiable person or persons who must be benefitted by one's performance of the duty. Third, the duty admits of some 'latitude' (Kant 2011, 390:6-7): it is up to the duty-bearer precisely how the duty is performed. The second and third features are related, since the 'latitude' might come in the form of choosing who is to be benefitted by one's performance of the duty. But latitude can also manifest in other ways; for example, one might have latitude over how, when, and how

¹ Citations of Kant are given according to the Academy Edition (volume:page).

much to benefit others, as well as latitude over who is benefitted. Thus the second and third conditions are distinct.

I will assume that affluent individuals' poverty-related duties are imperfect in this sense, though poverty-related duties are far from the only imperfect duties individuals have. However, while affluent individuals' poverty-related duties are plausibly imperfect, it is doubtful that affluent individuals' poverty-related duties are simply duties of beneficence: simply duties to help others *simply because those others are in need*. There are several ways of relating a moral agent, X, to another moral agent or person, Y, such that X has a moral duty to benefit Y. It is likely that all of these relations produce duties for the affluent – rendering affluent individuals' poverty-related duties more than simply duties of beneficence,

First, consider the relationship of *contribution*, which holds when X has contributed to Y being in some predicament. For example, if I non-culpably hit you with my car, then I owe you redress simply because of my contributory role in your injury. Some might question whether contribution produces a moral duty if it's non-culpable. However, cases of moral luck – in which an agent unluckily causes harm – suggest that contribution is indeed sufficient for a duty. Thomas Pogge (2002) influentially argued that the affluent are implicated as contributors to global poverty, via their (perhaps unintentional and so, perhaps, non-culpable) imposition of global trade regimes, which they enact via their governments. This contributory involvement produces duties that are not grounded simply in others' need, unlike pure duties of beneficence.

Second is the *benefiting* relation. This holds between X and Y when X receives a benefit from a wrong Z did to Y. Here we can imagine that someone steals your car, then gives it to me as a present. I neither caused, nor am culpable for, the theft. Yet I benefited from it. I received an advantage because of an injustice done to you. I therefore owe it to you to give you back the car (or at least I owe you some sort of redress). In the case of poverty, we can think

of people who are forced by poverty to accept poorly-paid and dangerous jobs in garment factories (an example discussed at length by Young (2011)). The consumers of the garments *benefit* from the injustice of exploitation that the employers enact against the workers: the consumers get garments at extremely low cost, as a result of the impoverished conditions that force workers to accept the exploitative offer to work in terrible conditions. This produces duties (or, as Young would say, ‘forward-looking responsibilities’) for those who receive this benefit.

Third is the *ability* relation. This holds when Y’s situation is particularly dire and X is capable of alleviating the situation in some way. While ‘ability’ is a *necessary* condition of all duties, the idea here is that in some special cases ability is a *sufficient* condition for a duty. Specifically, ability is sufficient for a duty when the ability is to contribute to the alleviation of a *particularly dire situation*. This is implicitly the relation that Kant and Ross each evoke when discussing duties of beneficence. The ability relation sometimes produces a *perfect* duty, not just an *imperfect* duty. The classic example of the ability relation producing a perfect duty is an ‘easy rescue’ case: for example, a situation in which you are drowning in a shallow pond and I can easily rescue you (Singer 1972, 231). In that situation, I owe it to you to rescue you. Of course, there are many reasons to resist Singer’s analogy between drowning and poverty (Kuper 2002; Wisor 2011). One is that poverty does not produce a neat one-on-one relation between an impoverished person and an affluent person who is has the duty to improve the situation. Thus, it is doubtful that the ability relation produces a perfect duty in the case of poverty. But it remains true that affluent people do have a particular ability to contribute to *some* aspects of the process for alleviating poverty – whether these contributions come in the form of political activism, charitable donations, or other actions. And if the stakes are high enough, then those abilities produce duties – though not ones that correlate straightforwardly to rights of identifiable persons, as in easy rescue cases. Of course, ability-based duties arise

only when the situation is extremely dire. This raises the question of ‘what it means to be poor’: do ability-based duties arise only for extreme and absolute poverty, or also for cases of relative poverty in which the affluent person is only slightly better off than the impoverished person? I assume the duties arise at least in the former case. Somewhat weaker duties might also arise in the latter case, though those duties will have increased strength if factors such as contribution and benefit are also in play.

It’s worth noting that these three duty-generating relations – causation, benefit, and ability – accord with a variety of normative ethical theories, not just deontological ones such as Kant’s and Ross’s. The idea that these three relations generate duties can be viewed as rules of rule consequentialism (Hooker 2000), as public rules or private heuristics of other forms of indirect or sophisticated consequentialism (Railton 1984), or as the ‘v-rules’ that the virtuous agent consults when deliberating about action (Hursthouse 1999). In this way, there are at least three plausible bases for affluent individuals’ poverty-related duties (contribution, benefit, and ability), where these three bases can be endorsed from a range of background normative theories.

That said, all three duty-generating relations arise in a somewhat ‘indirect’ way between affluent individuals and impoverished individuals. Affluent individuals’ contributions to and benefits from poverty are rather unlike hitting someone with a car or receiving someone’s stolen car – just as having the ability to help alleviate poverty is rather unlike having the ability to rescue someone from drowning (Kuper 2002; Wisor 2011). While one can give money to a person begging for money in the street, one cannot entirely ‘fix’ their situation on one’s own. The point is even more stark concerning the relation between those living in absolute poverty in the global south and affluent people living in the global north. In this case, each of the three duty-generating relations is mediated by vast social, economic, and political structures. It is impossible to say that *this* affluent western person contributed to, or benefited

from, or has the ability to reduce, *that* person's absolute poverty who lives in the other side of the globe. That's because poverty – and the benefit that affluent people receive from poverty – is overdetermined: any given impoverished person would still be in poverty, regardless of whether any particular affluent person extracted themselves from the complex causal chains that lead to poverty; and any given affluent person would still reap the benefits of poverty, regardless of whether any particular impoverished person managed to extricate themselves from that system of causal chains; and any particular affluent person's charitable donation or piece of activism usually will not make a difference to any identifiable individual, because the thresholds that determine the activities of collective agents usually cannot be reached by one individual acting alone (Cullity 2004, ch. 4).

For this reason, it is helpful to think about the three duty-generating relations as ways in which individuals can be enmeshed within a vast *web* or *structure*. The web or structure is constituted by billions of individuals, who are connected by complex socioeconomic relations. These relations include relations of employment, purchase, supply, and so on. Via such relations, all individuals come to be connected indirectly with those who are distant from us in a given supply chain or social process. It is this *structure* that affluent individuals contribute to, benefit from, and have the ability to (somewhat) alter. Likewise, when some within the structure live in poverty, this is the result of the whole structure – not the result of isolatable actions of particular agents. In this way, poverty is a 'structural injustice' (Young 2011). Yet poverty's structural nature does not undermine the existence of relations of causation, benefit, and ability: it simply means that those relations cannot be said to hold between identifiable individuals; instead, they are ways in which individuals relate to the structure. The relations still produce duties, even when the relations are held to the structure that produces poverty.

So affluent individuals have duties related to poverty. But what do those duties demand? If we assume that 'duty' implies 'ability,' as I do in this chapter, then it cannot be that

every affluent individual has a duty to eradicate poverty – or even that every affluent individual has a duty to securely and permanently end poverty for just one impoverished person. (To be sure, some affluent individuals have the ability to do this: Elon Musk could pull many individuals out of poverty if he wanted to, and he plausibly has a duty to do so. But not *every* affluent individual has that ability, so that cannot be the general shape of affluent people’s duties.) Most affluent individual cannot satisfy such a demand. It is possible that affluent individuals’ duties demand contributions to organisations that provide effective aid to those living in poverty (on which, see the chapter on “Utilitarianism and Poverty,” this volume). Arguably, though, such ‘marginal’ contributions do not respond appropriately to the structural nature of poverty and the structural nature of affluent individuals’ connections to it. If poverty is a structural problem – one arising out of a complex web of relations – then an apt remedy would seem to be one that addresses that structure. From this perspective, affluent individuals’ donations to aid organisations can be only part of the strategy. Political actions will also be called for, where these include such actions as voting, petitioning, protesting, boycotting, and so on.

How demanding are the duties of affluent individuals? Without aiming to settle this question, I will simply note that there are various methods by which philosophers have aimed to limit the demandingness of affluent individuals’ poverty-related duties. These methods apply as much to affluent individuals as to impoverished individuals, whose duties were discussed in the previous section. First, individuals arguably have duties to help others pursue their projects (beyond poverty reduction), which logically implies that the individual themselves is also permitted to pursue similar projects (Cullity 2004). If an individual is permitted to pursue some project, then it’s implausible that her poverty-alleviation duties demand infringements on that project. Second, there may be considerations of fairness in poverty reduction, which may imply that an individual needn’t do more than their fair share of poverty reduction (Murphy 2000).

Third, there may be a moral prerogative for an individual to give their own interests or projects somewhat more moral weight than other considerations, such as the three considerations that produce affluent individuals' poverty-reduction duties (Scheffler 1982). This does not render the duties non-existent, but it does render them less demanding than a straightforward utilitarian calculus would suggest. Fourth, an individual may need to have ample resources if the individual is to remain an autonomous and rational moral agent (Herman 2002).

Affluent individuals, then, plausibly have duties to act to alleviate poverty. Those duties come from relations of contribution and benefit, as well as from the relation of having the ability to assist. Such relations are held primarily to the social, economic, and political structures that cause poverty. These structures are therefore an appropriate site for affluent individuals' action, though the demands of those actions may be limited in various ways.

Collectives' Duties

There are numerous kinds of collective agents that are capable of bearing moral duties. These include states, firms, charities, and civil society groups, amongst others. Such collectives are duty-bearing agents in virtue of the fact that they are constituted by individuals who are united under a rationally-operated decision-making procedure that has the capacity to attend to moral considerations (Collins 2019, ch. 6). The deliberations, decisions, and actions of such collectives are not to be identified with the deliberations, decisions, and actions of their members – and neither, therefore, are these collectives' duties to be identified with members' duties. This point is important, because it means that a collective can have a duty to do something that no member could do if acting alone: a duty to secure freedom from poverty within a state's population, for example.

The ontologically distinct nature of collectives' poverty-related duties has long been recognised in the case of some collectives, namely, states. In the literature on human rights

(such as the human right to subsistence), states are perhaps *the* traditional bearer of poverty-related duties (see e.g. Shue 1980). More generally, human rights are often conceptualised as generating duties primarily for states. If this conceptualisation is correct, then, insofar as poverty-related duties are duties to fulfil human rights, it makes sense that those duties would be borne primarily by states. (On the connection between poverty and human rights, see the chapter on “Poverty and Human Rights,” this volume.) And, of course, states are collective agents with their own distinctive duties, under the picture summarised above. So it is reasonable that states should be viewed as the bearers of poverty-related duties – perhaps even the primary (or, we might say, ‘first port of call’) duty-bearers.

In stating this, it is important not to miss the implications for individuals. When a collective agent has a duty, each member of that collective has a duty to use their role in the collective, as appropriate, with a view to ensuring that the collective does its duty (Collins 2019, ch. 7). So, states’ duties do not simply ‘sit’ at the level of the state, with no implications for individuals. Instead, a state’s duty to alleviate poverty creates duties for the state’s members to engage in robust and proactive monitoring and correction of the state. In democracies (at least), a state’s members include its ordinary citizens. So states’ duties imply individuals’ duties – duties borne by individuals simply in virtue of their membership in a duty-bearing collective – where these individual duties are quite independent from individuals’ ‘standalone’ duties discussed in the previous section. The membership-based duties of individuals are likely to bear most heavily on individuals who hold public office, simply because they have a role in the collective that renders them most capable of using the collective’s procedures to induce the collective to perform its duty. But low-ranking members (such as ordinary citizens of democratic states) will also have duties entailed by their states’ duties (on similar duties of states’ ordinary citizens concerning local and global justice, see Hobden 2021).

Assuming one cares about eradicating poverty efficiently and effectively, there are definite advantages to seeing poverty-related duties as primarily borne by states towards their citizens – that is, seeing the duties concerning a particular person’s poverty as borne by that person’s state ‘in the first instance,’ until or unless that state reneges. Most prominently, state-held duties have the advantages of being potentially ‘perfect’ rather than ‘imperfect,’ thereby overcoming some of the indeterminacies in the content of imperfect duties. Consider that states’ poverty-related duties can satisfy the three conditions introduced above for perfect duties. First, states’ poverty-related duties are satiable: the state’s duty is fulfilled when the state’s entire population securely enjoys and absence of poverty. Second, states’ poverty-related duties are plausibly associated with rights: the state has duty owed to each citizen of the state separately (that is, many states have millions of poverty-related duties, each owed to an individual citizen), such that each citizen has a right against that the state’s poverty-related duty *to her* be fulfilled in a way that benefits her. And third, the state’s perfect duty of poverty eradication does not admit of latitude in the outcome to be produced (where that outcome is security from poverty for all citizens) – even though the state does have latitude concerning the means taken to produce that outcome.

As just formulated, states’ perfect duties of poverty-eradication are *domestic* duties: they are duties to ensure all citizens enjoy secure freedom from poverty. This formulation has several advantages. If poverty-related duties are held by states towards their own citizens, then the duties have the advantages of stability, accountability, and legitimacy. All else being equal, action by a state for its own citizens is likely to be more predictable and dependable than actions by a foreign state – since the latter might change course for reasons of political expediency at home. Likewise, a domestic state is (relatively more) accountable to those whose poverty is at issue, while a foreign power is accountable to others. Such accountability makes the duty more easily demandable by those to whom it is owed. And, to the extent the domestic state is

legitimate (that is, to the extent that the state has the right to rule and its citizens have moral obligations to obey its laws), its actions of poverty alleviation will inherit that legitimacy. By contrast, foreign states lack legitimacy. For these reasons, the primary poverty-related duties of collective agents are those held by states domestically.

However, such duties face two problems. The first is that, in some cases, such duties will violate the dictum that duties imply abilities. In failed or dysfunctional states, it simply will not be true that the state is able to ensure that all citizens enjoy secure freedom from poverty. The state cannot hold millions of duties, with each one requiring that the state ensures a particular citizen is free from poverty. In such cases, other states (and/or their citizens) may have ‘secondary’ or ‘back-up’ duties, concerning poverty in the unable state. The second problem with domestic-focused duties for states is one of noncompliance or unwillingness: even in those states that are able to procure freedom from poverty for all citizens, state corruption, indifference, or ideology might cause the state to fail to comply. Here too, other states (or their citizens) may have duties to act as the ‘back-up,’ by stepping in to cover the non-compliance of these states.

The problems of state inability and noncompliance lead to the reintroduction of imperfect duties – this time, held by foreign states or individuals. Such imperfect back-up duties raise a number of moral problems. These moral problems concern the way in which back-up duties might serve to undermine presumptive relations of equality between states and serve to overstep the level of influence foreign powers should have over domestic situations. These moral problems serve to demarcate the content of foreign states’ poverty-related duties: these are duties to support the primary duty-bearer, not to entirely replace the primary duty-bearer. Importantly, though, such constraints on back-up duties’ *content* do not serve as constraints on back-up duties’ *weight* as presumptively decisive reasons for action.

In addition to states, other collective agents also exhibit the kind of moral agency that enables them to bear poverty-related duties. Such agents are less often discussed in the context of poverty-related duties. Perhaps most controversial here are for-profit collectives. The idea that Amazon or Google might have poverty-related duties may send a shiver down the spine – precisely because action by such collectives lacks the stability, accountability, and legitimacy mentioned in support of states’ domestic poverty-related duties. However, for-profits stand in exactly the structural relations to impoverished people that affluent individuals stand in: for-profits *contribute* to poverty, for-profits *benefit* from poverty, and for-profits have the *ability* to alleviate poverty. It is plausible that such relations to the structural injustice of poverty do produce duties for for-profits. However, it is important to be clear on the remit of these duties. For-profits may have duties to provide material goods for the communities with which they interact (impoverished or not), but they also hold a prior duty to engage with impoverished people in the market on fair terms. This will likely mean, amongst other things, duties to offer impoverished people working conditions that are not exploitative, degrading, or that perpetuate poverty (see similarly Berkey 2021).

Finally, consider charities and civil society groups. Such collectives might be thought of as acting out of supererogation: that is, as performing actions that are ‘above and beyond’ the call of duty. So it might seem strange to suggest such collectives have duties. Certainly, the creation of such groups by individuals (or by other collective agents) might be supererogatory. But once such collectives exist, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that they have duties related to poverty. To be sure, they may not stand in the relations of *contributing* to poverty or of *benefiting* from poverty. But many such collectives do have the *ability* to alleviate poverty, which can produce duties on its own. This goes most obviously for those collectives that were set up to target poverty itself. But insofar as poverty is intertwined with other social issues (such as racism, climate change, asylum seeking, and so on), collectives that were established

to address these other social issues may well find themselves with duties concerning poverty too.

Here, it is necessary to introduce a final distinction in duties: the distinction between positive and negative duties. Positive duties are typically thought of as duties to *act*, while negative duties are duties to *refrain*. Both kinds of duty can be exceedingly demanding, since refraining from harmful action can bear a high opportunity cost. Yet the two duties are conceptually distinct. So far, this chapter has concerned itself with positive duties. However, when we consider charitable or civil society collectives that were set up to achieve moral ends other than poverty reduction, their primary poverty-related obligations may well be negative: these would be obligations to *refrain from exacerbating poverty* while the collective goes about its primary business of addressing some other social issue. After all, there is a difficult question of how to balance poverty against other social ills; it is not clear that poverty has a trump card. For those collectives that are positively working elsewhere, a negative duty to refrain from exacerbating poverty might be their main poverty-related moral duty.

But what about those collectives that are already working to end poverty? Do they have *duties* to keep doing so? Two considerations point towards ‘yes.’ First, such organisations have raised reasonable expectations on the part of those who benefit from their programmes that the programmes will continue. Second, consider the issue of motivation. As Ben Laurence has recently argued, any agent of change must be capable of working towards that change *voluntarily*: “[a] plausible agent of change is a potential agent of change who is, or might realistically come to be, willing to pursue change to address the relevant injustice.” (2020, 362) From this perspective, collective agents that are already working to end poverty are amongst the main agents of change concerning poverty. The fact that these agents are *already* motivated to work towards reducing poverty is a consideration in favour of duties for that agent to

continue doing so: after all, the preexistence of the motivation makes the duties relatively less difficult for these agents to discharge.

In sum, then, states are not the only collective agents with poverty-related duties. While states' duties to render their populations free from poverty are perhaps the primary poverty-related duties, other states have back-up duties in cases where the primary duty-bearer is unable or unwilling. More controversially, for-profits, charities, and civil society groups (even those that were not set up to address poverty) also have duties – at least in certain contexts and as a bridge to states' performance of their primary duties.

Conclusion

There are numerous ways of dividing up the terrain of duties: duties to oneself versus duties to others; perfect duties versus imperfect duties; primary or 'first port of call' duties vs. secondary or 'back-up' duties; positive duties versus negative duties. As we have seen, all of these distinctions and all of these types of duties arise in the case of poverty.

Those who live in poverty potentially have self-regarding and other-regarding duties to tackle poverty. Affluent individuals' duties, by contrast, are clearly other-regarding rather than self-regarding. Individuals' poverty-related duties are likely to be imperfect rather than perfect (whether those individuals live in poverty or in affluence). In contrast to individuals' duties, states' duties can be conceptualised as perfect, rather than imperfect. Within states' duties, we can see the distinction between primary duties (held by a state to its own citizens) and secondary back-up duties (held by a state to citizens of another state that is incapable or unwilling to perform its primary duties). Finally, when we consider non-state collective agents, we can see duties that are positive, perfect, primary duties (such as duties of for-profits to offer decent working conditions or duties of poverty-focused organisations to continue their work),

as well as duties that are negative, imperfect, or secondary (such as the poverty-related duties held by organisations that aim to address some social ill other than poverty).

The language of duties is far from the only language that's worth using in the realm of poverty. But as I hope to have shown, this language enables us to cast a wide and varied net around the various agents that might be called upon to respond.

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