

RIGHT TO REPLY

In his review of my book *Poverty, Ethics and Justice*, Tony Fitzpatrick makes three important criticisms against the book that cannot be left unchallenged. The first concerns my revision of the distinction between absolute and relative poverty. He implies that my revision is as imprecise as I judge the distinction between absolute and relative poverty to be. The second criticism concerns my use of the fact that many people are rationally inconsistent in the way they endorse moral values selfishly to their own benefit. He thinks to point out such a lack of moral integrity is “that whereas they might persuade us to change our practices they might also encourage us to revise our ideals”. In addition he judges that I use the fact of our accountability to our fellow citizens “to establish the nature of that accountability”, an “analytical shift” that Fitzpatrick believes “requires much more care”. The third criticism is that the core argument in the book “slides past a lot of relevant debates all too easily and quickly”. He senses a certain “casualness” in my work, suggesting that there is not “sufficient rigour” nor proper in depth discussions of the major philosophical theories dealing with issues of poverty.

I challenge these three criticisms by showing that [1] my revision of the absolute-relative distinction can do much more than he suggests, [2] my core argument about moral obligations to eradicate poverty has a much larger scope than Fitzpatrick acknowledges, and [3] there should be room for different approaches to major ethical problems that allows for different intellectual designs and presentations in larger scale projects.

Fitzpatrick’s first major criticism is that my revision of the distinction between absolute and relative poverty seems as imprecise as I judge that distinction to be. Let me briefly explain my revision and demonstrate why I think this definition is an improvement. In the book I revise the traditional distinction between absolute and relative poverty into a new distinction between extreme and intermediate poverty [Lötter 2011: 271]. I define poverty as a lack of economic capacities [both resources and competencies to fittingly use them] in humans that has two distinct effects, differing in degree. I use the words extreme and intermediate to indicate the degree of seriousness of a specific case of poverty in terms of the harmful consequences for the well-being of humans [Lötter 2011: 29]. Intermediate poverty is the first stage of poverty and extreme poverty is a further worsening of a person’s condition [Lötter 2011: 36]. People who suffer from extreme poverty thus also suffer fully from all the harms, effects, and consequences of intermediate poverty [Lötter 2011: 36]. The advantage of this distinction is that the focus is on the degree of harm involved in the two kinds of poverty, whilst in both cases there are universal elements embodied that make the definitions useful in any society. Both definitions nevertheless retain contextual elements as well that can only be specified meaningfully in terms of a particular society [Lötter 2011: 271].

Let me explain these two kinds of poverty in more detail. The first kind is “intermediate poverty”, the lesser of the two evils because the degree of harm involved is less. People suffering from intermediate poverty *firstly* do not have sufficient economic capacities to enable them to participate in the characteristic social activities judged to be constitutive of being human in their society [see Nussbaum (2011: 17 – 45) for a related, but different way of looking at these issues]. Note both the universal and contextual aspects of this part of the definition. The universal elements cluster around generic social activities that humans have engaged in throughout known history – all matters regularly described and measured by the human sciences. Classes of such activities include actions linked to governance of diverse aspects of the community’s shared life to establish a just social order, education to train and equip others to fulfil useful tasks, initiation ceremonies for welcoming new participants in

diverse social practices, thanksgiving events for expressing gratitude for services rendered in smaller or larger contexts, celebration of significant events on smaller (family) and larger (society) scale, and entertainment to amuse and amaze others through expressing rare individual and team talents and skills. Although we find examples of virtually all these classes of actions in all human societies, the ways and means of expressing them differ from society to society, both in terms of comparisons between contemporary societies and comparisons between societies in the present and societies of the past.

People suffering from intermediate poverty *secondly* do not have sufficient economic capacities to enable them to develop their unique human capacities in ways that other humans appreciate or might yet come to appreciate. The universal aspects in this part of the definition of intermediate poverty are in human potential for various kinds of activities, such as intellectual work, physical activity, artistic expression, manual labour, creativity and design, and so on. Within the context of a specific society, people are exposed to the possibilities available within that society to develop their own unique skills and talents [see Nussbaum (2011) and Sen (2009) for a similar approach couched in a different vocabulary and dissimilar theoretical framework]. People with talent in sport can only develop those talents in relation to the kind of sport available in their society, the facilities available, the coaches with expert knowledge for training, and the competitors that challenge them. In a more advanced, developed society with more resources some individuals are able to develop themselves better and have more opportunities to excel at some or other human activity.

In addition to the loss of dignity caused by intermediate poverty, people suffering from extreme poverty face additional harm as well. Their lack of economic capacities is so great that they cannot provide for their most basic needs, i.e. they lack one or more of adequate nutrition, shelter, clothing, and medical care to such an extent that their health starts to suffer through specific conditions that result from deficient nutrition, shelter, clothing, or medical care [see the detailed empirical research done by the United Nations Development Programme (2013)]. Note again both the universal element in this part of the definition of poverty, as well as the contextual aspects – phenomena regularly depicted by the human sciences [see the new approach heralded by the OECD, that now aims to employ more nuanced, refined, and accurate measures of poverty to better reflect both material living conditions and the quality of human life. They thus measure income and wealth, jobs and earnings, housing, health status, work and life balance, education and skills, civic engagement and governance, social connections, environmental quality, personal security, and subjective well-being to provide more precise, wider spectrum profiles of poverty (see OECD 2011)]. Despite individual variation based on personal characteristics, *all* human beings will run into problems with their health if they lack nutrition, shelter, clothing, and medical care to a significant extent. The contextual element lies in the kinds of nutrition, shelter, clothing, and medical care available in a society and the cost thereof relative to what is available and its cost in other societies.

I have two major problems with Fitzpatrick's critique of my use of the rational inconsistency to challenge many non-poor people about they selfishly live their moral values. The one is that he fails to see how easily the charge of rational inconsistency can turn into a strong political challenge that poor people can direct at rationally inconsistent non-poor people. Let me explain. Note my formulation of this idea: "Suppose a person selfishly agrees to the protection and opportunities provided by graciously interpreted and benevolently specified sets of democratic values, norms of justice, conceptions of human rights, or universal moral principles respectful of human dignity, then that person must accept that a consistent

application of these sets of moral values implies that poor people can claim similar protection and opportunities from them.” [Lötter 2011: 163]. Our point of difference about the value of pointing out rational inconsistency lies in the fact that I contend that poor people “can claim similar protection and opportunities” from those who inconsistently support shared moral values. Poor people can easily mobilise to turn a lack of rational consistency into demands for reasonable reciprocity. They, as citizens who feel done in, deprived, or cheated by fellow citizens taking that kind of attitude can simply engage in political campaigns to challenge them on their inconsistency. At this point the charge of rational inconsistency transforms into a demand for reasonable reciprocity. But this demand by poor people for an account why their poverty is not being addressed is not the only moral obligation that poor people face to eradicate poverty. The series of arguments through many chapters that demonstrate how a multitude of moral obligations arise to eradicate poverty as a result of our voluntary choices about our public moral values form the core argument of the book, one that I believe Fitzpatrick misread.

Thus, the second major problem I have with Fitzpatrick’s reading of the moral obligations I propose we have to eradicate poverty is that he misreads the core argument of the book, as it is far more comprehensive than his reading allows. A large part of the book explains what poverty is and how its consequences harms human beings as individuals, families, communities, and societies.

What I show in the book is how our various moral obligations to eradicate poverty can be portrayed from different angles. Full simultaneous implementation of all core moral values combined can lead to an overhaul of institutions and a rethink of every individual’s role in the struggle against poverty [Lötter 2011: 279]. The central point of the book thus is that all our moral values urge us to assume a strong moral obligation to eradicate poverty and to prevent it from recurring [Lötter 2011: 280]. Thus, the ultimate challenge for humans is to empower ourselves to deal with poverty fittingly by properly understanding the value and power of collective human action for addressing the seemingly intractable problems of poverty that often persist through generations [Lötter 2011: 280].

In the book this argument for moral obligations to eradicate poverty is a multi-layered one that progresses through different phases to portray our moral obligations to eradicate poverty from different angles. Most of them build on the foundation that assigns dignity to every human. A reconstruction of my overall argument based on these different angles reads as follows:

1. *Enlightened self-interest.* I point out that an individual’s deep dependence and reliance on many different networks of people who enable or facilitate what the individual can do creates moral obligations, albeit self-interested ones.
2. *Impact on others.* Throughout the book I highlight that individual humans must justify why we allow the negative impact of our words and deeds and their consequences to negatively influence other people’s lives [Lötter 2011: 17].
3. *Generally accepted moral values.* In chapters four and five I present detailed analyses of the effects of poverty on poor people to demonstrate how these effects contravenes several generally accepted moral principles. For example, I argue in Chapter 4 that violations of human dignity are serious matters that must be addressed and I assume as a general moral principle that “we morally reject any unnecessary, preventable suffering to the bodies and health of human beings” [Lötter 2011: 61]. The effects of poverty cause both these consequences in people’s lives and thus what poor people experience flies in the face of what

we expect our moral values to prevent.

4. *Reasonable reciprocity.* I argue that we must be willing to give an account in face-to-face situations by answering “why some non-poor citizens can command massive shares of societal resources and consequently deplete available means that could have enabled suffering people in inhuman circumstances to have minimally decent lives” [Lötter 2011: 175. See also Lötter 2011: 187].

5. *Core values underlying democratic institutions.* I set up a detailed argument to demonstrate how the core democratic values of liberty, equality and solidarity require that governmental institutions show equal concern to protect the fundamental interests of every citizen. I judge them as the strongest instruments we have for protecting our fundamental interests that therefore can assist us best in the struggle to eradicate poverty that diminish and destroy people’s lives.

6. *Ideas of justice as best practice poverty prevention.* In chapter nine I argue that a conception of justice has two major functions, i.e. to prevent harm to humans and to establish conditions for humans to live flourishing individual and shared lives worthy of being human. I demonstrate that a liberal-egalitarian conception of justice has the ability to prevent all forms of poverty and could effectively be employed to guide the complete eradication of existing poverty.

7. *Fundamental goals of political associations.* In chapter eleven I argue by means of a thought experiment that contemporary citizens will collectively choose five goals to guide the functioning of all public governance institutions [see Lötter 2011: 249]. All these goals have a distinct moral element as they jointly function as a kind of highest level social contract of humans with one another about the nature and functions of our collective governance of each other, a “contract” that we revisit and renegotiate according to set procedures as times goes by [see Lötter 2011: 227].

8. *Our collective responsibility for the social order.* I express another perspective on our moral obligations for the differential effects public institutions and policies have on people by looking at the power we humans have to collectively determine the nature of our shared social structure [Lötter 2011: 212]. The various tenacious manifestations of poverty require teamwork by a whole society and thus poverty can best be dealt with through collective human action to establish a just social order rather than individual charitable efforts on their own [Lötter 2011: 210, 211].

Others, such as Nancy Fraser [2009] and the United Nations Development Programme [2013: 4-9, 36-37], have made similar points like these ones of mine about the need for a comprehensive framework for the eradication of poverty built on a theory of justice. Such suggested frameworks contain multipronged strategies at all levels by everyone involved, giving priority to the voices of poor people to guide a multi-faceted global struggle (see also O’Neill 2008: 152-153; Collier 2008: xi, and Sobhan 2010: 1-12). These frameworks support the global perspectives on poverty eradication from the major international organizations working in this field, like the World Bank, UNDP and the OECD.

9. *Demands of compensatory justice.* Many instances of poverty result from some kind of injustice. In those cases the people who committed the injustice incur moral obligations to eradicate the resultant poverty.

10. *Other special moral obligations.* Specific circumstances, events, or actions can also generate moral obligations to eradicate poverty.

Fitzpatrick's third major criticism is that I seemingly do not have sufficient in depth discussions of the literature. Although I understand and appreciate the value of discussing state of the art philosophical theories in depth and engaging them directly, that is not the only – or even the best - way to write a book on an extremely complex moral problem like poverty. I chose to develop a theory that views poverty as a complex moral phenomenon by engaging social science research results as the primary evidence my theory has to explain.

Widdows [2011: 9–10] characterises global ethics as “fundamentally multidisciplinary” and thus it requires “expertise from across the spectrum”. Leading global ethicists immerse themselves in “political theory and empirical analysis” with the aim to “influence practice and policy”. In these ways the global ethicists want to “contribute to creating global relations that are more just” so as to reduce and eradicate “global injustice and suffering” [Widdows 2011: 10]. Granted my flawed attempt at following this kind of approach, nevertheless it seems one legitimate way of doing ethics when confronted with a complex issue like poverty that has such a major global footprint?

Taking this kind of approach does in no way imply that I did not take philosophical theories seriously, as the philosophical literature on justice and sociological literature on poverty form the horizons of my thought and the sources of my ideas. There are numerous references to standard works in the literature that show they form the context and background for my own theory. However, I still think that a book that presents a unique look at the fine detail of poverty from a range of moral perspectives and offers an explanatory theory that includes moral guidance for a wide range of moral agents on their responsibility to eradicate poverty has value as an alternative approach.

Bibliography

Collier, Paul. *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Fraser, Nancy. *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

Lötter, H.P.P. [Hennie]. 2011. *Poverty, Ethics and Justice*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Nussbaum, Martha. *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011.

O'Neill, Onora. "Rights, Obligations and World Hunger." In *Global Ethics: Seminal Essays*, edited by Thomas Pogge and Keith Horton, 139-155. St.Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2008.

OECD. *How's Life? Measuring Well-Being*. OECD Publishing, 2011.

Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

—. *The Idea of Justice*. London: Penguin Books, 2009.

Sobhan. *Challenging the Injustice of Poverty: Agendas for Inclusive Development in South Asia*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2010.

The United Nations Development Programme. *Human Development Report 2013: The Rise of the South: Human Progress in a Diverse World*. New York: The United Nations Development Programme, 2013.

Widdows, Heather. 2011. *Global Ethics. An Introduction*. Durham: Acumen Publishing Limited.