

## **A Redistribution of Wealth:**

### *A moral issue*

*Dan Kellar, beingthechange.ca*

There is clearly a gap between the richest nations in the world and the poorest. The richest countries have a population free to do as they please with no real cares other than what to wear for dinner that night, or to school that day, and the poorest with a population merely trying to scarp enough food together to feed themselves, living in constant fear of violence. Economic aid flows from the developed to the underdeveloped countries and always has restrictions attached. The aid never is enough to get the underdeveloped countries on a return path self-sufficiency, just enough to ensure reliance through the restrictions. The wealth contained in the world is more than enough to allow every human the necessities of life. In reality, a system of distribution and a world of peace need to exist before such a redistribution of wealth is accomplished.

The main issues that philosophers are dealing with regarding the problem of the underdeveloped world is whether or not any aid should be given, and in what form the aid should come. The neo-Malthusians disagree with the Kantians who disagree with the utilitarians who disagree among themselves. There is no one way of looking at the issue that will make all happy and the only thing that is agreed by all is that the solution should mean that humans will be able to continue to live on the earth for centuries to come, and that to do so we must eliminate hunger and famine one way or another.

First off is the neo-Malthusian belief that “the only secure way to end famine is by limiting population growth. In the long run no increase in available food could match

population increase.”\* This philosophy believes that there is a finite population, or carrying capacity that the earth can handle and that if we help those in need by giving aid then they will simply multiply and face another, larger famine. They do not believe that famine is the ultimate population check, simply the most imminent. The neo-Malthusians seem to have no faith in the underdeveloped world to get themselves out of the problems that exist after aid is given: “there may be resistance to the introduction of technology that will change existing and preferred ways of life...the populations that most risk famine might not have the prudence to limit their increasing populations”†. These arguments give no light to potential technological advances nor do they believe that the demographic transition that took place in the now developed world over the last half century can happen in the underdeveloped world. Clearly, the neo-Malthusian argument abandons those most at risk of famine and poverty; to help them would lead to our own destruction.

The developmentalist views make a lot of sense when dealing with plight of third world nations. They have an optimistic outlook for ending world hunger though they realize the process will not be easy or quick. They also “stress that huge political and social as well as economic changes may have to be made if the enterprise (a program aimed at ending hunger and famine) is going to succeed”‡. The developmentalists always put things in terms of economy: local, national and multi-national. These theories always look to trends in development in other countries. They don’t believe economic growth is the end all and cure all as examples of rapid growth without the eradication of

---

\* O’Neill Onora. 1993, “Ending World Hunger” in *Matters of Life and Death*, ed. Tom Regan, McGraw-Hill, Toronto. Pg. 242.

† Pg. 244

‡ Pg. 245

dire poverty appear in Brazil and action against poverty without economic growth appear in Costa Rica. Developmentalists also think that economic growth is not always linked to population growth as “they point out that fertility rates have generally fallen after and not before economic growth...third world population will undergo a demographic transition only when they begin to be less poor.”<sup>§</sup> This is one of the developmentalists’ strongest points and should be elaborated on and questioned. It is not covered as to how exactly the developing nations will become less poor, all that is covered is that some aid is good so more do not die needlessly. Early on I believe it prudent to go in with food aid from first world nations when a country is in the midst of a famine. This would not hurt local farmers fiscally as their crops would have been destroyed by whatever is causing the famine and would give short term relief to those who truly need it. After the food aid is delivered the developed nations need to implement a program of economic aid to the countries without the restrictions that generally go with these international loans. This money needs to be freely given with no requirements of the recipient to pay back or favor the country that gave the aid.

The justification for these gifts of economic aid would be that the developed world at one point colonized the underdeveloped world, stole their resources then left them without the infrastructure that would enable them to sustain themselves. Underdeveloped nations did not exist before the colonial times. True, nations were more or less developed than others, but nations only existed if they had the ability to provide for themselves through domestic production or trade. As the more developed nations spread in search of more land and resources for their kingdoms they moved into the less

---

<sup>§</sup> O’Neill Onora. 1993, “Ending World Hunger” in *Matters of Life and Death*, ed. Tom Regan, McGraw-Hill, Toronto. Pg. 245

developed nations and took control, usually through force or threat of force. The less developed nations could not defend themselves against gunpowder so they allowed their country to be controlled. The more developed nations started to remove resources and ship them back to the motherland and gave the countries from where the resources were removed nothing or very small, unfair payments<sup>\*\*</sup>. After World War Two there was a colonial exodus from the conquered countries and they were left without the infrastructure to continue to extract resources, if there were any left at all to extract. Even the developmentalists point to colonialism as a reason for the current plight of the third world nations: "...due to colonialism, under which these economies stagnated because the imperial power either prevented or discouraged certain forms of trade or manufacture, or encouraged the production of goods that did not compete with the industries of the developed world..."<sup>††</sup> From this we can understand that the developed world should take on some responsibility into the situations that the underdeveloped world are now in and try to get them out, not through new-colonialism but through reparation payments that have little restriction (obviously a country has the right not to give money if they know it will be used for an army that could threaten their own sovereignty, as the right to self-defense still exists).

Now once again we return to the problem that if we help the third world to grow and become autonomous then we risk going beyond earth's carrying capacity. The utilitarians believe, as did the founder Bentham, that the greatest happiness should be achieved. From this single driving thought there has been much disagreement within

---

<sup>\*\*</sup> Lesson 7 pg. 10

<sup>††</sup> O'Neill Onora. 1993, "Ending World Hunger" in *Matters of Life and Death*, ed. Tom Regan, McGraw-Hill, Toronto. Pg. 245

utilitarians as to how the greatest happiness will be achieved. Garrett Hardin has a very Malthusian view on the situation. His famous lifeboat analogy conveys his views very effectively:

“The citizens of developed countries are like the passengers of a lifeboat around which other, desperate people are swimming. Those in the lifeboats can rescue some of the drowning. But if the affluent rescue some of the starving, this will – unlike many lifeboat rescues – have bad consequences. It will mean that the affluent world will then have a smaller safety margin. In the short run this might be outweighed by the added happiness and benefit of those who have been rescued, but the longer-run effects are grim. The rescued will assume that they are secure; they will multiply, and the next time that similar dangers arise they will be more numerous and rescue will not be possible.”<sup>‡‡</sup>

His views lead us to believe that we should let those that cannot take care of themselves, regardless if it is one person, a whole nation, or a whole continent, flutter in the water and drown so we do not have to make any sacrifices to our own lives and thus remain as happy as we currently are. Hardin believes that since those in the affluent world have obtained what they have, they have no requirement to give anything to those less affluent. The issue of private property comes up and will be addressed again later.

Peter Singer, another utilitarian, and one with a touch more humanity in him than Hardin, suggests the complete opposite of Hardin, an approach that leads to interventionist conclusions. His whole argument comes from the basis that the affluent world has so much and to give up even the littlest of luxuries in our life it would not even start to compare with the lives of the hunger stricken. “He then points out that contributions to famine relief, even if they amount to a large proportion of our income – say, 50 percent – do not sacrifice anything of moral importance comparable to that of the hunger they relieve. Hunger and starvation cause far greater suffering than the loss of

---

<sup>‡‡</sup> O’Neill Onora. 1993, “Ending World Hunger” in *Matters of Life and Death*, ed. Tom Regan, McGraw-Hill, Toronto. Pg. 251

minor luxuries...”<sup>§§</sup> We can take from his words that he believes that the attitude towards consumption that seemingly drives North American social habits is morally reprehensible as we sit in a life of luxury and millions worldwide remain hungry. He thinks there is a moral case for redistributing some of our wealth to the third world through food aid and other development programs.

A third utilitarian, with yet another view is Tony Jackson of Oxfam, a famine relief agency. Jackson disagrees with Singer: “Providing food aid – even project food aid, which is intended to get the food where it is needed – has been shown to harm the needy.”<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Jackson points to how food aid can compete with local food production, to how much of the time the actual distribution of food aid comes into hands with a political agenda, and how the food that is purchased only help the farmers of the affluent nations who sell the food (surplus that could not make it into local markets) at a subsidized price. Jackson thinks that the advocates of food aid are in it for their own positive publicity and do not fully understand the potential impacts food aid can have. Jackson does however mention that food aid is quite important in critical situations such as famine relief; it just cannot become a dependant situation.

If Benthamite calculations were possible there would be little arguments which utilitarian course we would take. However, these calculations are not possible and since it is results and not principles or intentions that count, none of these ideas will have any results unless what they delineate are implemented. Though charity is not always preached by utilitarians, many, such as Singer believe in the prime directive for any utilitarian: greater happiness. His thoughts of helping with food and other

---

<sup>§§</sup> O’Neill Onora. 1993, “Ending World Hunger” in *Matters of Life and Death*, ed. Tom Regan, McGraw-Hill, Toronto. Pg. 252

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Pg. 252

developmental aid will bring the greatest happiness for the most amount of people even if some have to make small adjustments in their lives.

When the argument of private property comes up as it did with Singer and Hardin, it seems clear that the following can be concluded: 1) without the raping of colonies much of the resources that we have today would not be available, and that the resources that helped build the colonial powers to the status they now presume would not have been available; 2) The current world powers owe much of their fortunes to the colonies which they stole from and therefore should give back to the former colonies in the form of development aid without many restrictions (other than the previously mentioned in regards to armaments); 3) The small sacrifices that would be required for those in affluent nations to make sure all humans have the necessities of life and access to resources that would make their lives better are so small in comparison to the happiness and relief they would bring. Just a small redistribution of funds would make all the difference to those living in the poor countries as their dependence would change to national and personal (to a certain scale) autonomy.

Another philosophy one might consider when dealing with the topic of hunger, famine and the redistribution of wealth is Kantian thinking. The Kantian formula of the end in itself states: “act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means but always at the same time as an end.”<sup>†††</sup> This is a philosophy where coercion is not used to achieve an end nor is endangerment, exploitation or deception. Kant views those four acts as morally wrong and not inline with proper human behaviour. Kant believes that everyone is entitled to

---

<sup>†††</sup> O’Neill Onora. 1993, “Ending World Hunger” in *Matters of Life and Death*, ed. Tom Regan, McGraw-Hill, Toronto. Pg. 258

autonomous action and life, and that states should have freedom to act autonomously.

There is no action Kant specifically prescribes for redistribution of wealth but to follow his writings would lead colonial powers to give aid to their former colonies as they had used them as mere ends as they used the four aforementioned morally wrong acts.

Another proof that shows Kant's angle on aid is in the Kantian commitment to preserve life in two ways:

“First, others must not be deprived of life; secondly, others; lives must be preserved in all forms that offer them sufficient physical energy, psychological space, and social security for action... Kantians are therefore committed to the preservation not only of biological but of biographical life. To act in the typical ways humans are capable of we must not only be alive, but have a life to lead.”<sup>†††</sup>

Though Kantian thinking cannot fully tackle redistribution of wealth, Kantian ethics give another point of view on the subject, a point of view that makes a strong argument for redistributing wealth. How this redistribution is to take place is not mentioned, but redistribution is none the less concluded.

The carrying capacity of the world is not nearly met and predictions indicate that at our current levels of consumption that the world will be fine with 10 billion<sup>§§§</sup>. This is not predicted to be met until the year 2200 and this has taken into account the development of the underdeveloped countries. The ability exists to feed everyone in the world as there is more than enough food produced; much of it is simply thrown away. The small sacrifices the people of the affluent nations can and ought to make to ensure the survival of fellow human beings living with virtually nothing can come very easily. The recent ‘buy nothing day’ on November 28<sup>th</sup> brings awareness to the ignorant in the

---

<sup>†††</sup> O’Neill Onora. 1993, “Ending World Hunger” in *Matters of Life and Death*, ed. Tom Regan, McGraw-Hill, Toronto. Pg. 269

<sup>§§§</sup> Human Geography Ed 4 pg.133

developed world that our consumption brings problems to the underdeveloped nations. For our products we exploit labour and resources and in return give little to nothing and help only those that are already well off in these countries. Little trickles down to those who really need it. An enormous social change, both here and in the poor nations, is needed to ensure the survival of earth's neediest humans. Action must be taken against developed nations exploiting the underdeveloped and the action must come from the public. To quote a more recent philosopher:

“And yes, I recognize the irony that the very system I oppose affords me the luxury of biting the hand that feeds. But that's exactly why privileged fucks like me should feel obliged to whine and kick and scream- until everyone has everything they need.” \*\*\*\*

The above comes from a song by Dr. Chris Worthington of the group Propaghandi. In his writings and songs he advocates for change in our current consumption and to realize that the exploitation that we see now in the third world should not be happening. His philosophy advocates a redistribution of wealth and aid for underdeveloped countries.

A key to the whole problem is the education and empowerment of those in less developed countries. Family planning is known to lower birth rates, this planning plus the aforementioned development thus eliminating the Malthusian view<sup>†††</sup> of starvation as a population control. When the colonial powers left the colonies they left them without the ability to sustain themselves. It can only help humankind to educate more of it and the former colonials have the power and money to accomplish this. As it was they who interrupted the development of these countries, they now have the moral obligation to aid in their development; a redistribution of wealth is required to meet this obligation.

---

\*\*\*\* Chris Wetherington, 1996. “Less Talk More Rock: Resisting Tyrannical Government, Fat Wreck Chords: San Fernando.

††† Lesson Seven pg. 6