

Why we don't end poverty.

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Life for the overwhelming majority of mankind has always been nasty, brutish and short. It is so in the poor countries still. This disparity between the rich and the poor has been noticed. It has been noticed, most acutely and not unnaturally, by the poor. Just because they have noticed it, it won't last for long. Whatever else in the world we know survives to the year 2000, that won't. Once the trick of getting rich is known, as now it is, the world can't survive half rich and half poor. It's just not on.

C. P. Snow, (1959)

When you ask most people, they will tell you that it is the greatest scandal of our times that poverty still exists on such a massive scale. Western Europe industrialised more than two centuries ago, and has since known a gigantic rise in standard of living. Other parts of the globe followed, and now a little while later, about one sixth of the world's population can be said to be prosperous. Another third is pretty well off and improving, another third is poor but have prospects of changing their fate in the nearby future, and the remaining sixth is devastatingly poor, fighting to stay alive each day, not even considering the next one. Economists have written tons of books on the subject, stating numerous reasons why such poverty still exists, ranging from colonialism to geography to religion. No doubt many of these analyses are correct and valuable, but if we stop looking through our statistical economic goggles, and get back down to the level of common sense, a simple but catastrophic observation comes to mind. It is one that has been made by almost all of us, by whom I mean us westerners, at least once in our lifetime.¹ We thought about it, pondered a little on this bizarre fact, maybe we discussed it for a while with our family and friends. Probably at some point a person regarded a lot wiser and more experienced than ourselves told us that things just aren't as simple as that; after hearing this comment and not being entirely satisfied but nevertheless more or less convinced we shrugged our shoulders and directed our attention back to our television set.

I am talking about the plainly obvious fact that there is enough wealth in the world to easily supply each and everyone's basic needs, potentially even for an infinite amount

¹ Whenever the term 'we' occurs, it refers to the majority of the one sixth of people that are prosperous.

of time.² Still we don't distribute our wealth in a way that fulfills this purpose, while all it takes is every person of the 'Rich North' to donate a dollar a day to every person of the 'Poor South'. At this point in the imaginary reflection of a random westerner, there are a multitude of options that can occur to avoid a contradiction in his worldview. Man is in essence a logical being, nobody will consciously believe two mutually incompatible statements. This does not mean that man is incapable of logical error, but it means that when he is confronted with one he will recognise his mistake. Back to the possible intellectual bends that our friend could make. Maybe we are obstructed in the distribution in wealth because of practical matters: there is not enough cooperation between governments, agreements cannot be reached as to how we should divide the costs, third world countries have corrupt governments impossible to work with, and so on. Another barrier could be that we ourselves will in the long run get trapped in the poverty that we are trying to alleviate. By giving a tiny amount of our own resources, a chain reaction will be set off that makes our economy collapse. Or it might be said that any help we provide will only ensure short term effects, but in the long run we couldn't possibly maintain a constant lifeline. The official reason that economists will offer is that poor countries have to become rich like we did, by entering into a free market system. "Capitalism generates wealth, government redistribution generates poverty", is the economist's motto. Lots of other reasons exist as to why the logical possibility of eliminating poverty is not an implementable (present, and past) physical possibility.

What all these reasons have in common, is easy to see: we would *like* everyone to enjoy a decent standard of living, but we *can't* realise this. This statement provides most of us with a suitable readjustment of our worldview, it has succeeded in eradicating the threat of contradiction. What is this contradiction that is being referred to? It is what happens when we add a truth value of 1 (or true) to both of the following statements at the same time:

1. We want to eradicate extreme poverty, even if this means settling for a little less comfort for ourselves.
2. We don't want to eradicate extreme poverty, even if this would just mean settling for a little less comfort for ourselves.

² Except of course when the sun implodes as a super nova.

The rest of this paper will be concerned with showing that the second statement is true simply by showing that the first one is false, which elementary logic teaches us is exactly the same thing.

Logical laws are the only laws that we cannot even imagine to be broken. Any law invented by humans can and is broken all the time. Even though the law states to stop in front of a red light, a pedestrian will refrain from crossing the street at a red light if a car is coming at a speed of 150 km/h. Whether the laws of nature can be broken is a delicate matter, especially since it is hard to see what this would mean. Nonetheless we can *imagine* any physical law to be broken, just think of miracles. When we get to the logical, our mind is incapable of ignoring it. Where laws of nature are a precondition to life, the laws of logic are a precondition to thinking. For this reason the arguments here presented will be stated in their logical context, to avoid any confusion or misunderstanding. In concordance with the method of the *reductio ad absurdum*, the first step is assuming the truth of that which is to be disproved. In this case that comes down to assuming that we do want to eradicate extreme poverty, even if this means settling for a little less comfort for ourselves. This assumption can of course be denied, but that will have the same result as this argument will have.

The second step is nothing more than explaining the common sense observation that we could easily eradicate extreme poverty, say within two years. Nobody will deny that there is enough wealth in the world to ensure a humane existence for all humans. The standard of living I have in mind includes healthy food, a roof above your head, access to basic medicine and acceptable working conditions. In other words, things we all take for granted. Normally standards of living are expressed in income. The world minimum wage is theoretically one dollar per day, per person. This income should allow for the sort of standard I have described; in any case, it is accepted as the threshold income for extreme poverty. Since the amount of extremely poor people is about the same as the extremely rich, it would be sufficient for every one of us to donate one dollar a day to reach the goal of eradicating extreme poverty. Taking into account other costs such as transport of goods, organisation of a worldwide network of poverty relief, a more realistic solution would be to include the one third of humanity that are relatively rich, and let them donate half a dollar a day, doubling the total amount. All of the money should go to one organisation, otherwise there will be

difficulties in communication. The U.N., the WHO, the European Commission, etc. could then all together launch a massive advertisement campaign, informing people that for each person donating one person will stop suffering. It should be clearly stated that “*You* can make the difference, you can save a life, or you can kill someone”, so that people will realise that they are responsible for negligence if they do not contribute. Indeed, in most constitutions it is stated that if someone is dying in front of your eyes, and you refrain from trying to help him or her, you are guilty of a serious offence.

Within such a system there is no moral escape possible. That it requires settling for just a little less comfort for ourselves is obvious. The average rich family consists of less than four people, and four dollars a day would amount up to less than five percent of their net income. The all too common phrase: “I don’t donate because nobody else does, and *I* surely can’t make a difference”, that people use to justify their unwillingness to help can offer no refuge in this context. Adding to this, if it were the case that the majority of people defended themselves in such a way, the assumption we started with is then already proven to be wrong. To see this, we can simply translate it into a longer set of statements, together equivalent to the assumption: “A wants to eradicate extreme poverty if...”, “B wants to eradicate...”, “C wants to ...”, etc. So when A, B and C refer to the common phrase mentioned above, they are lying. The excuse that others will not do as you do doesn’t work, since as Kant so beautifully put it, the basic rule of ethics is that my maxim should be such that I would want it to become a law.

A possible reaction to this proposal (besides its simplicity, which in no way reduces its credibility as there are hundreds of these kinds of proposals one can think of) is that it will not change anything fundamental about the economic situation, it only succeeds in helping on the short term. This counterargument succeeds insofar that it points out the importance of long term investments in addition to the day-to-day aid. Every human being should have the possibility to be independent and self-reliant, so economic development is essential in creating a better world as well. Nevertheless none of this has any effect on the obligation to help on the short term. That would be like saying to a diabetic: “I have only got enough medicine to last you a month, after which you will certainly die, so I might as well not give you any medicine at all.”

The combination of the previous two claims imply a third one: we are eradicating extreme poverty. If someone *wants* to do something, and he *can* do it, then he *does* it. “Well, I want to become famous, and I am sure that there is some way of achieving it, but most likely my name will not be written in history books. Doesn’t this show that your conclusion is superficial?” Indeed the ordinary usage of these terms doesn’t support my conclusion. However in this case their application is not ordinary. Normally when we speak of someone wanting something, we mean that he would ascribe a positive valuation to the aquirement of the goal desired. In this sense, people want a lot of things, like getting rich. But as soon as it becomes clear what is required to achieve the goal, what amount of effort has to be put in, the vastness of our desires decreases enormously. This is because each desire conflicts with others, which we might value more. So the person wanting to become famous, probably would not spend his entire life looking for ways to reach fame, putting in all the energy he has. Other aspects of his life are more important, for example having job-security, or sleeping more than the five hours a night he would if he were to use *all* his energy. And even if he would spend his life accordingly, and still doesn’t reach his goal, then his presupposition was wrong. There is no way he could become famous, except by chance, which we never rely on except for winning the lottery. In the argument of interest here, it has been assumed that “we want to eradicate extreme poverty, even if this means settling for a little less comfort ourselves.” In other words there is no conflict of interests, for we are prepared to accept the *means* to the *end*; namely diminishing our wealth marginally to reach a humane living standard throughout the globe. Aside to this reflection on the definition of terms, another point of clarification needs to be added. It might be said that in our hearts we truly want a world without extreme poverty, but we have been brainwashed and conditioned by massmedia, politics, education and what have you, to such an extent that we are no longer in control of our desires. Like a herd of sheep we follow our shepherd, the uncontrolled free market system supported by ideological tinted advertisement and education. To adhere to such a view of mankind is even more devastating with regard to the moral sensitivity of humans than the conclusion of this paper is. Luckily this ship does not sail. No matter how ingenious all the attempts are to prove that there exists no free will, they have absolutely no influence when it comes down to it. For whenever we are dealing with practical matters rather than theoretical abstractions, it is a prerequisite that we consider human beings to be free agents. All reflections

concerned with human action have at least to assume that we are capable to bear responsibility for them. If not, ethical appraisals or denunciations make no more sense than telling a stone not to fall. In short, we are not concerned with issues of human freedom because no one ever is in practice. Therefore we may rightly conclude that we are eradicating extreme poverty.

The only step left in our argument is to demonstrate that we are not eradicating extreme poverty. This is an easy task, since in general economists and NGO's agree that extreme poverty has increased in the last decades, whereas a status quo would be enough to validate the statement. It is not my intention to support my claims with statistical documentation, since the economical observations made here are very general and are wellknown facts of our times. One could object that we are just about to eradicate poverty, today we stand at the treshold of a new world without poverty. In support of this reference can be made to Sachs' work *The end of poverty* (2005), where he argues that we have the possibility to eradicate extreme poverty by 2025 if we stimulate economic growth in the developing countries by using so called 'clinical economics'. Two answers are in place here. Firstly, Sachs clearly states that he does not predict the end of poverty, but that it is possible. Whether or not it will happen depends on whether we set our minds to it. Taking as an example the recent summit of the G8 in Gleneagles, it seems that the leaders of the North have yet to obtain a sensitivity for the destiny of the poor. They do not seem to value poor people more than they do ducks, because the net result of the summit was that our 'truly compassionate' representatives ended up throwing some bread crumbs of debt-release, and expected the ducks to quack thankfully accordingly. The 0.15% of GDP that the USA spends on world aid will not suffice by a long run to reach Sachs goals, only if they (and others) donate the agreed upon 0.7% there might be a change for the better. At present the situation is remarkably similar to that of the time of Snow when he expressed his concern with the gap between the North and South. Surely our economy has grown a lot during the past fifty years, but it was already strong enough to fulfill the goal of ending poverty and everyone expected this to happen before the year 2000. Why should the present, or the future, do better than the past in a task that depends solely on human will? Secondly, even if we assume for argument's sake that we do reach the end of poverty in our lifetime, can this count as proof that WE eradicated poverty? In a certain sense it does, for in the end it is our economy that

supplied the factors for economic growth in developing countries. But to affirm our responsibility by reference to our economy is a misleading step, because the most striking characteristic of a free market system is that you can not control it. Of course some actions have to be taken to limit the power of the free market, otherwise the situation will not change and fair trade resulting in poverty eradication is not possible. After the necessary measures have been taken, such as eleviating trade barriers, applying the differential diagnosis techniques of Sachs, etc., it is the 'invisible hand' of the economy itself that will take over and generate prosperity. This means that in this situation we are not entitled to say that we are eradicating poverty.

The attentive reader familiar with logical arguments knows what will follow. We have run up on the barrier of our thought, analysis can take us no further but only back: we are faced with a contradiction. Starting with two premisses we were lead to a conclusion that is contrary to the facts. There are three possibilities, either the argument is not sound, what we thought were facts in fact aren't, or one of the premisses is not true. This essay has concerned itself with arguing for the truth of the argument, the facts, and one of the premisses. Inevitably we infer the falsehood of the other premiss, which was indeed an assumption rather than a fact. Symbolically what has been said can be summarised as follows:

1. We want to eradicate extreme poverty, even if this means settling for a little less comfort for ourselves.
2. We can eradicate extreme poverty when this means settling for a little less comfort ourselves.
3. We do eradicate extreme poverty.
4. We don't eradicate extreme poverty.
5. 0=1 (in other words a contradiction.)

CONCLUSION:

6. We don't want to eradicate extreme poverty, even if this would just mean settling for a little less comfort for ourselves.

The shocking result is that all those millions of people who are dying right now, are doing so *because we choose to*. To many people this seems absurd. There are those exceptions that claim that man is inherently evil, not capable of altruism, on whom this will have no effect. The majority of mankind does not fall under this category,

instead they believe that every human being has a minimal amount of conscience and ethical sensitivity, that includes helping someone who is dying. The truth of the conclusion we reached would deny this somewhat Christian view of mankind. Where we started off with a concern for a specific ethical dilemma, our reasoning has brought us to the broader area of human ethical standards. To avoid admitting that man is 'bad', two escape ways come to mind. We could try to adopt this anomaly into our current perspective by explaining it as an exception. On the other hand we can respect the power of human thought and sincerely accept the outcome. If so we have to review the critically normative aspect of ethical judgement. The rest of this paper will direct attention to these options briefly, but a thorough examination of ethical paradoxes is not in place. To do that would be far beyond the scope of this text and its purpose.

The first escape will not carry us very far. In writings on the subject of ethics there exists the distinction between 'far ethics' and 'close ethics'. Intuitively the former could be wrongly understood as referring to the fact that we are not concerned with people's misery or happiness if they live far from us and are not a part of our lives, the latter then pointing to our dedication and value for our friends and family or those we can relate to because they are in some way like us. This interpretation does not take the words 'far' and 'close' literal enough. They have to be understood in terms of distance and time, as well as in the sense just described. An example illustrates their usage. Imagine a man living in a ten storey building, with a balcony. Above him lives a couple with a baby, whom he has never met. Let's say he has plans on going to a party that night. What would his reaction be if the baby fell death onto his balcony? In such a situation it is understandable that the man will not be in the mood anymore to go out, considering the drama that has just occurred. Even though he does not know the parents, he will be sad and compassionate. In this example there was a closeness in distance.

This distinction can serve to explain why we don't care about the suffering of those in faraway countries. Westerners see poor people dying on television in the same way as they watch an action movie. So in many cases what seems to be unethical can be re-interpreted in a wider understanding of ethics. People should care about everyone, but in practice they can not. However not all Westerners live far from the extremely poor. In South Africa we can observe the same wealth divisions as we

can in the world as a whole. Roughly speaking, about 40% is extremely rich, and 40% is extremely poor. These population groups are not separated geographically, they live side by side. (Not in the same neighbourhoods of course.) Every day rich South Africans are confronted with poverty, and every day they turn their heads the other way. Assuming that South Africans are not crueler than other people, we have a clear example that the problem has not been solved. The distinction between far and close can carry us some way, but not far enough to escape the grasp of our unwelcome conclusion.

Respecting the outcome that we do not live up to the standard that we set out for ourselves is the only viable option. The gap between the rich and the poor is a consequence of the gap between our theory and our practice. Ethics is normative in nature, it tells us what we *should* do not what we *are* doing. When a person does not conform to the norm, he is said to be unethical. His actions are unethical in comparison to those prescribed by the norms. But what sense can we make of norms that are never lived after? There are people who donate substantially to charity organisations, and there are volunteers dedicating their lives to helping the unfortunate, but in all honesty we have to admit that this is a small minority. It is normal that only a minority lives up to ethical norms that are difficult to follow, so we might expect this scenario. However we are talking about one of the most basic and simplest norms: to help someone who is dying, especially if it is very easy to do so. Shouldn't at least the basic ethical standards be lived up to in order for us to be able to compare actions on an ethical basis? When nearly nobody achieves the elementary ethical requirements, we shouldn't conclude that humans are 'bad', rather we should conclude that the ethics are 'bad'. What we have touched upon is the problem dating back at least to David Hume of that which *is*, in relation to that which *ought* to be. His solution was to understand ethics in terms of human nature, leading to his naturalism. This means that valuations of good and bad are not rationally defensible using an ethical theory, but grow out of customs. By adhering to our normative view combined with unrealistic expectations of man we are led into the conflicts such as the one under discussion. We have to adapt our ethical standards to that which is, for in the end they are conventions coming forth out of habit. If this means that poverty will be with us for a while, it is no use feeling sorry and regretting it. A change has to come

about, the only question is which one: will we change our worldview, or will we change the world?

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