

Poverty, Facts, and Political Philosophies

RESPONSE TO “MORE THAN CHARITY”

Peter Singer*

Andrew Kuper begins his critique of my views on poverty by accepting the crux of my moral argument: The interests of all persons ought to count equally, and geographic location and citizenship make no intrinsic difference to the rights and obligations of individuals. Kuper also sets out some key facts about global poverty, for example, that 30,000 children die every day from preventable illness and starvation, while most people in developed nations have plenty of disposable income that they spend on luxuries and items that satisfy mere wants, not basic needs. Yet after summarizing an essay I wrote for the *New York Times Magazine* in which I argued that the average American family should donate a large portion of their income to organizations like UNICEF and Oxfam, Kuper writes: “But if Singer’s exhortations make you want to act immediately in the ways he recommends, you should not do so.” Why not? Because the approach I advocate “would seriously harm the poor.”

These are strong words. It is startling to be told that a substantial transfer of resources from comfortably-off American families to UNICEF or Oxfam would harm the poor. What about those 30,000 children dying from preventable illness and starvation? In its 2001 fund-raising material, the U.S. Committee for UNICEF says that a donation of \$17 will provide immunization “to protect a child for life against the six leading child-killing and maiming diseases: measles, polio,

diphtheria, whooping cough, tetanus, and tuberculosis,” while a donation of \$25 will provide “over 400 packets of oral rehydration salts to help save the lives of children suffering from diarrheal dehydration.” Perhaps these figures do not include administrative costs, or the costs of delivery, but even so, wouldn’t more resources for immunization and oral rehydration salts benefit the poor, rather than harm them? What about the projects Oxfam funds, like providing equipment and expertise so that Ethiopian villagers can dig wells to get safe drinking water near their village? Since getting water in Ethiopia is women’s work, this saves village women up to four hours a day. How can Kuper show that such projects “seriously harm the poor”?

Instead of discussing the work of the specific organizations I recommend, Kuper takes as his example the HIV/AIDS pandemic in South Africa, and asks whether it would help to give most of one’s money to an AIDS organization. Here I have to say, first, that since I have never recommended doing that, what Kuper says about this example does nothing at all to support his claim that what I recommend would seriously harm the poor. Putting that aside, however, Kuper does not give any grounds for believing that giving most of one’s money to an AIDS organization would “seri-

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ously harm the poor.” All he says is that the effect of his contribution “would be dwarfed and perhaps overridden” by President Mbeki’s views about AIDS. If something that helps the poor is dwarfed by a more powerful factor that harms the poor, that does not mean that it would have been better if the source of benefit had never existed. Some of the poor, at least, will still be better off. And while it is plausible that the benefits to South Africans brought about by the money Kuper could donate to an AIDS organization would be dwarfed by the failure of the Mbeki government to address the issue effectively, it is not so plausible to imagine that these benefits would be “overridden,” that is, totally negated, by Mbeki’s attitude. At least, Kuper would need to explain why this would be the case.

Instead of doing so, Kuper switches the example yet again, suggesting that we might want to contribute instead to “political accountability and economic reforms.” Rather than examine this suggestion in detail, however, Kuper then asserts that in Zimbabwe, “I may increase the power and hold of a kleptocratic elite.” The passage leaves it unclear whether it is my donation to an AIDS organization that may do this, or my contribution to an organization promoting political accountability and economic reforms. Presumably, however, there are ways of giving money to organizations working in Zimbabwe that do not increase the power and hold of the “kleptocratic elite.” If this assumption can be shown to be incorrect, then I would agree with Kuper that we should not give to organizations working in Zimbabwe. But does Kuper imagine that his reference to the difficulties of working in a country ruled by a corrupt elite will be news to agencies like Oxfam? Does he think that, over the fifty years they have been working in Africa and elsewhere,

Oxfam has never noticed this problem? Is he unaware of the extensive, detailed discussions these agencies have, both in-house and with outside experts, about how to overcome these difficulties, or, if they cannot be overcome, when to pull out of a country in which they are unable to help the people they are seeking to help?¹

Bounding on over this complex terrain, Kuper hits on another idea: that “we may do better for South Africans by buying furniture and clothes from ethical manufacturers and manufacturers in developing countries than by donation.” I agree that we should support “fair trade” schemes that buy goods produced in poor countries and ensure that the workers who produce them get as much as possible of the purchase price. Whether \$100 spent in this way does more good than \$100 given to Oxfam is a factual question. Oxfam, like other agencies, is itself involved in helping to set up fair trading schemes, both at the marketing end in rich nations, and by making microloans to workers so that they can buy the tools or raw materials needed to set themselves up in manufacturing goods to sell through such schemes. (Kuper later expresses support for such microcredit schemes, but minimizes the role played by agencies like Oxfam in supporting them.) There are, however, some very poor people who cannot be helped through fair trading. Rural villagers may live too far from transport to get their goods to international markets, or they may lack the raw materials to produce goods that anyone in rich nations wants to buy. It is therefore my belief that generally the donation will do more good than the purchase of

¹ For an example of Oxfam’s politically aware thinking that is already seventeen years old, see Diana Melrose, *Nicaragua: The Threat of a Good Example* (Oxford: Oxfam, 1985).

goods of equivalent value. Should I be given evidence that this view is wrong, I will be happy to recommend that, instead of donating to aid agencies, Americans should spend a substantial part of their income on buying products from ethical manufacturers in developing countries, or on tourism to developing country resorts that have ethical labor practices. To do so would not require any change in my underlying ethical position. It would still be true to say that people in rich nations ought to be using a substantial amount of our income in the way that will most effectively help the world's poorest people.

This response is one I have made previously.² Kuper refers to it as "It will depend on the story you believe." He counters:

On this ultrawide specification, one seems compelled to acknowledge that the sincere extreme neoliberal agent is deeply moral in his or her character and conduct, since he or she believes that conspicuous consumption and massive differentials in income are the most effective ways to alleviate the plight of the poor. Singer's metric for improvement—without a related set of political principles—leaves us with few grounds on which to dispute this narrow neoliberal interpretation.

Here at last there is a fundamental disagreement between Kuper and me. Not over the neoliberal view of the most effective way to alleviate the plight of the poor—we agree that it is wrong—but over how we can know that it is wrong. I believe that it is wrong because I do not think that the evidence supports it. Of course, whether the evidence does support the neoliberal view is a large question, and not one that can be adequately addressed here. Nevertheless, it is on the evidence of the impact of neoliberal policies, unsupported by either government or private aid, on the plight of the world's poor, that I would rest my case against the neoliberal.

Kuper, on the other hand, appears to seek some kind of political philosophy that would make the case against the neoliberal immune to refutation on the basis of evidence. If that is what he wants, I think it is misguided. To want some kind of guarantee, independently of how the facts may turn out, that the neoliberal is wrong, is to have a kind of faith that is independent of the evidence. Do we want to hold our political philosophies in the way that many theists hold their faith, persisting in believing in God independently of any evidence or sound argument for such a belief, and in the face of substantial evidence—the problem of evil—that there cannot be a God with the attributes they claim God has? There have, unfortunately, been adherents of political philosophies who have taken this attitude to their ideology. The results have not been encouraging. I prefer to remain open to believing in whatever the balance of evidence supports.

For completeness, I shall mention a few other things that Kuper says with an air of dissenting from my views, when there is really no disagreement between us. Thus he says that we ought to help "large numbers of people enmeshed in social systems rather than isolated individuals." I have never said that our aid should be directed to isolated individuals. In a similar vein he writes: "Effective poverty relief will thus require above all extensive cooperation with other agents—indeed it will require the creation or reform of agencies to reduce poverty." That is exactly what Oxfam and UNICEF already do. He

² See, for example, my response to the claim that giving aid would only worsen the population crisis and lead to a greater disaster in the future, in Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 235–41. Fortunately the factual claims on which that objection was based have proved erroneous.

points out that sometimes aid has had unwanted negative consequences, and tells us that “perhaps the most relevant injunction of all is ‘proceed carefully’”—again a recommendation that does not tell anyone in the field anything they did not already know. Drawing on Rawls, he says that some inequalities can be justified on the grounds that they improve the lot of the most needy, or of all of us. I have never denied that.

Given the paucity of argument Kuper offers to support his claim that giving to organizations like Oxfam “would seriously harm the poor,” I find it troubling that he tells people that they “should not” donate

substantial sums to these organizations. He must know that most people are only too happy to find an excuse for not giving money away. By providing them with just such an excuse, the major impact of his article, should it be widely read, would be to maintain the status quo in which most residents of developed nations do virtually nothing to relieve the extreme poverty in which 1.2 billion people live. Kuper, I am sure, does not want that. He would therefore do better to direct his criticisms to the real obstacles to relieving poverty, and not to those people who are already thinking much as he does about how the world needs to change.