

*Do Countries Have Moral Obligations?
The Case of World Poverty*

BRIAN BARRY

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BRIAN BARRY was born in London in 1936. He read philosophy, politics, and economics at Oxford and also received the D.Phil. there for a thesis written under the supervision of H. L. A. Hart. Before crossing the Atlantic in 1975, he held positions in a number of English universities, including, latterly, those of Professor of Government at the University of Essex and Official Fellow of Nuffield College. After a year each at the University of British Columbia and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Stanford, he joined the faculty of the University of Chicago, where he is Professor in the departments of political science and philosophy and of social sciences in the college.

Professor Barry is the author of *Political Argument*, *Sociologists, Economists and Democracy*, and *The Liberal Theory of Justice*. He is currently working on a book to be entitled "Don't Shoot the Trumpeter, and Other Essays on Social Justice," and one that will take up the themes of the lecture published in this volume. He was founding editor of *The British Journal of Political Science*, is presently editor of *Ethics*, and is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

I do not think that I need to say much about either the timeliness or the importance of the subject of this lecture. In September 1980, for example, in a specially convened session of the United Nations General Assembly, the rich countries of the world stonewalled all the demands of the poor ones for the implementation of the so-called New International Economic Order. And it is plain that these demands, although rebuffed in the United Nations and UNCTAD, are not going to disappear, but are destined to form a central part of the international agenda for the rest of this century and beyond.

Although the subject is of such practical import, I should perhaps explain that my own interest in it arose originally out of a purely speculative problem. It occurred to me several years ago that we might discover something interesting about the concept of justice itself by looking at situations other than the usual ones of contemporaries in a certain society. I therefore began to study justice between generations and between countries. However, although I still find the intellectual puzzles that these topics throw up as fascinating as ever, I have very gradually arrived at some substantive views that are, I think, somewhat at odds with those of most people in the world's rich countries, including (and, indeed, especially) this one. And it is in the role of an advocate, rather than that of a completely detached philosophical analyst, that I appear before you tonight.

The actual demands of the poor countries, as represented for example by the Declaration on a New International Economic Order passed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1974, or the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States adopted in 1975, are a heterogeneous collection of points of widely varying generality and importance. And the justificatory theory within

which these demands are presented is the now-standard United Nations one of asserting a “right” corresponding to each demand. This is, of course, a style of rhetoric not unknown in the USA, but in either the domestic or the international context it seems to me to have very little to contribute to rational discourse. In my view all it can be taken as claiming is that there is some valid reason for meeting the demand, but it does nothing to explain what that reason is. The statement of a specific right ought to come at the end of an argument? rather than being presented as if it were one.

For these reasons, I shall not in this lecture be offering a defence of either the content proposed or the reasoning offered for the New International Economic Order. But on one central and crucial point I shall be supporting the claims of the poor countries as they have been developed in various international bodies in recent years: namely, I am going to argue that, as a matter of justice, rich countries should be transferring resources to poor ones on a substantial scale.

The idea that justice requires the continuous and systematic redistribution of resources *within* countries is now a commonplace, even if not a wholly unchallenged, one. The same idea applied to the world as a whole is, however, still generally regarded as fairly wild. It will be my object here to try to make it more familiar — to domesticate it, if you like. It is, in fact, my view that only by cultivating a schizoid mentality is it possible to combine a belief in the justice of domestic redistribution and the notion that international transfers are a matter purely of humanitarian aid rather than one of the just distribution of resources. Of course consistency can be achieved in either of two ways. Professor Nozick, for example, would suggest that we retain the collective entitlement of rich countries to what they produce (or whatever they receive in exchange for what they produce) and extend the same doctrine of “what we have we hold” to the domestic rich. I shall, however, be pursuing the opposite tack and suggesting that the principles of justice supporting internal redistribution also support international redistribution.

At this point, the following challenge is liable to be made: am I not overlooking the essential differences between the domestic and international contexts? Is it not these differences that render the concept of justice inapplicable between countries? I shall begin by taking up this challenge in relation to a core conception of justice, the most universally acknowledged and I think the most indisputable. This is the notion of justice as reciprocity, the idea that benefits should be requited, equal value exchanged for equal value, and the like. I shall first acknowledge that this concept does require a context — a normative order — if it is to have application. I shall then, however, suggest that the international sphere is enough of a normative order for justice as reciprocity to apply in it in at least some matters. And then, having, I hope, established that justice as reciprocity does apply to international economic relations, I shall ask what redistribution of resources between countries it calls for. I should perhaps say now that the implications I shall find are rather limited. However, in the second half of the lecture, I shall go on to set out a second, complementary, principle of justice that I shall try to show has more far-reaching implications. I shall conclude with a few remarks on the question of the relation between justice and self-interest in international affairs.

Having laid out my strategy for the rest of the lecture, let me now come back to the challenge that I said had to be met before we could proceed further. Putting the point in as simple a way as possible, and leaving out all the qualifications that might be introduced in a more leisurely treatment, the argument to be considered is that justice as reciprocity requires stable expectations, and that in the international sphere, unlike the domestic sphere, there is no basis for these. The first part of the argument is valid. As David Hume observed, a single act of benevolence, if it succeeds in actually going good, requires no practice underlying it. But a single act of justice (and justice for Hume was largely a matter of respecting property rights and keeping contracts) can-

not be understood, let alone unequivocally recommended, in the absence of an institutional framework. In other words, if I simply want to do you a good turn, that presents no problems. But if my idea is that one good turn deserves another, I have a reason for doing you a good turn only if I have cause to believe that you share this principle and will act on it when the time comes for you to do your bit.

All this, then, is fair enough. But the second part of the proposition is unfounded — at any rate if asserted as being true across the board. International affairs are not a pure anarchy in which nobody has any reason for expecting reciprocal relations to hold up. In economic matters, particularly, there is a good deal of room for stable expectations. A firm that sells something abroad, or signs a contract to obtain something from a foreign country, does not have — generally speaking — much greater fears of default than it does with trading partners in its own country.

Of course, it is true that states do not have a “common power to keep them in awe,” as Hobbes said. But what is the significance of this? The only relevance here is to actual expectations. You can produce an *a priori* argument that effective norms require a central source of sanctions, but if it appears not to be so, then that should settle the matter.

It is also true that you cannot *absolutely* count on some contract not being repudiated, but it is equally true within a country that there might be some change of regime that would invalidate existing contracts. Absolute certainty is not to be had in this life. But in fact, because of the adverse implications of tearing up international contracts, revolutionary regimes are often quite punctilious in observing external agreements even if they recast the domestic economy. I conclude therefore that the background conditions for justice as reciprocity to operate do exist in the international sphere. International relations may be an anarchy in the technical Hobbesian sense but not in any more interesting sense.

It may, of course, be said in defence of the Hobbesian thesis

that the ugly reality is laid bare at time of war. I do not see why war should be considered more real than peace. But there certainly is a long tradition to the effect: *Inter armēs silent leges*. Here I have some reluctant sympathy with the Hobbesian analysis, to this limited extent: I do not think that moral constraints are out of place in warfare, but I do think that justice has a relatively limited role to play. The strongest moral reasons for not fighting a war in a barbaric fashion are derived from humanity, not justice. For the obligations of humanity — although they have the drawback of leaving much room for judgement as to what they require in a specific situation — are universally binding. But the obligations of justice are derived from various conventions, controlling the treatment of prisoners of war, for example, or outlawing certain kinds of weapons. Thus justice in war is justice as reciprocity and here the weakness of reciprocity in the absence of appropriate contextual conditions does seem serious.

Let me go back, however, from warfare to economic relations. If I am right in saying that the conditions for the application of justice as reciprocity do hold in the international economic sphere, what implications does this have for the distribution of wealth between countries? The answer is, I think, that the implications are rather limited.

I shall distinguish three aspects of justice as reciprocity. One is keeping contracts. A second is fair exchange. And the third is the duty of fair play. Of these, contract obviously has no revisionary tendencies in itself. It underlies the whole system of economic relationships, but says nothing about the *content* of contracts. The second, fair exchange, says that equal value should be exchanged for equal value. It can be used to criticize the actual content of contracts and is thus potentially revisionary. But it runs into the traditional problem of the “just price.” That is to say, is there some independently-specifiable criterion for a fair rate of exchange between different commodities?

I do not think that all aspects of this question are totally

intractable. If I paint watercolors for a living and sell them for \$50 each to a dealer who turns round and sells them for \$1,000 each, it seems pretty uncontroversial that I am not getting an adequate return on my efforts. The relation between the royalties on a barrel of oil before 1973 and the price at which that barrel of oil found its way into the hands of the consumer in an industrial country was about like that. Banana producers, it has been estimated, are still in about the same position, as they get only about ten percent of the final price. If their take doubled, the final price would go up only by ten percent, so their revenues would probably almost double too. It is not surprising that commodity-exporting countries have in recent years taken an increasing interest in the amount they receive as a proportion of the final price and have sought to secure a higher ratio.

But none of this, of course, touches the main issue. The OPEC countries, obviously, have not simply gained a higher share of a fixed final price, but by pushing up their own take have pushed up the final post-tax prices in the industrial countries several times over. But is the price now more or less just than it was? I must confess that that does not seem to me an intelligible question. This is not to say that commodity prices are beyond rational discussion from a moral standpoint — or even the standpoint of justice in particular. But it does imply that justice as fair exchange does not have much to contribute to such a discussion. In my view we have to start from some desirable end-state and work backwards to the prices it implies rather than imagine we can define justice in terms of the exchange of equal values. Thus, it might be said that higher copper prices would be just because we have a duty to future generations to conserve resources. Or it might be said that higher copper prices will make the copper-exporting countries richer, and that would be a move in the direction of justice since they are mostly relatively poor (though not among the poorest). But we have to produce some independent argument that it is just to conserve resources or that justice would be served

by transferring resources from relatively rich to relatively poor countries. Where such judgements about justice could come from I will suggest later.

The third type of justice as reciprocity that I mentioned is the duty of fair play. This is the duty to do one's part in some mutually-beneficial enterprise. Now, the crucial point about justice as fair play is, it seems to me, that it presupposes the existence of some mutually beneficial practice already in existence. Given that such a practice exists, we can use the idea of a duty of fair play to criticize those who fail to contribute to it. But we cannot use the concept of justice as fair play to argue for the bringing into existence of mutually beneficial institutions where they do not exist now.

Therefore, the scope of justice as fair play in the international sphere is very limited. It could be used to criticize "free riders" on international agreements concerning pollution of the atmosphere or the oceans, or restrictions on fishing or whaling in international waters, where such agreements actually exist. But so long as such mutually beneficial agreements do not exist, the case for them should be argued from collective advantage rather than from justice. Justice comes in only once they do exist, to provide a reason for compliance (and then only so long as others comply).

This negative conclusion can be challenged. I doubt if I can hope to make both the nature of the challenge and the nature of my reply fully intelligible to anyone unfamiliar with the literature, but I will say something anyway. Charles Beitz, in his excellent book *Political Theory and International Relations*, argues as follows: since the international economy forms a single unit, because of the degree of interdependence between national economies, we should treat the whole world as, morally speaking, a single society. If so, John Rawls's theory of "justice as fairness," which is said by him to apply to a "society," should apply to the whole world, with the implication that economic arrangements should be such as to make the worst off people in the world as well off as they could be.

The problem with this argument is, as I see it, that it is either insufficient to establish its point or it is unnecessary, depending on the aspect of Rawls's theory we follow up. If we fasten on the idea that each person should do his bit in an enterprise of mutual benefit, we get out justice as fair play, but not, in the world as it is, much in the way of a duty to redistribute from rich to poor, because institutions corresponding (say) to social security within a country do not exist.

On the other hand, if we emphasize Rawls's idea that justice is whatever rules would be chosen from behind a "veil of ignorance" designed to eliminate knowledge of personal or external advantages, it is hard to see why the existence of actual cooperative relationships would be either here or there. If Rawls's arguments for the difference principle — making the worst off as well off as possible — are valid at all, then it would seem that we can argue immediately that they should be applicable globally.

However, if we go in that direction we immediately have to ask: why should we accept that principles chosen behind a veil of ignorance as specified by Rawls are just? How does this tie in with any recognizable conception of justice? This is, of course, a big question; but the essential point for the present is that the idea of justice as fair play will not itself carry the weight. What we need, then, are independent arguments to persuade us that it is just to set up institutions that take no account of personal and social advantages, and thus avoid the intrusion of what Rawls describes as "morally arbitrary" features. Such arguments, however, lead us away from justice as reciprocity altogether. And Rawls, in writings subsequent to *A Theory of Justice*, has increasingly moved in this direction himself.

Rawls's idea of the "morally arbitrary" is a powerful one, and, although I do not agree with all the implications that he draws from it, I do think that it leads us in the direction of an alternative conception of justice to that of justice as reciprocity. I am going to call it justice as equal rights, and I will develop an argument for it as the next point in this lecture.

To begin with, I think it is fairly easy to see that justice as reciprocity cannot be adequate in itself because it already presupposes some more fundamental criterion of distribution. Contracts presuppose prior property rights; fair exchange is morally significant only if the parties have a title to what they exchange (if I steal your bicycle and sell it back to you, how much credit do I get for not overcharging you?); and we can talk about cooperation for mutual benefit only if we have some baseline for measuring benefits in the absence of cooperation.

What we are looking for, then, is some distributive principle that will tell us something about basic entitlements. The one that I shall put forward is by no means original — if it were I would have less confidence in it. It can be traced back directly to an influential article by H. L. A. Hart called “Are There Any Natural Rights?” But the basic idea can be traced back further — to Kant, for example. My object here, in any case, is not to recount its history but to try to make it as persuasive as I can. However, I will start by outlining Hart’s own approach, because I think it helps to clarify the essential logic.

Hart argued that if there are any special rights arising out of the actions of people (paradigmatically, contracting with one another), there has to be a general right to equal liberty. For it makes no sense for people to be able to *change* their rights if there is no baseline from which they change them. This is, of course, the point I have already anticipated in suggesting that justice as reciprocity cannot be a complete theory of justice.

Now, stated this baldly, the argument may seem like a piece of legerdemain. And it is, I think, correct to say that Hart offers no definite reason why the *general* right must be an *equal* one. However, one can surely make an argument to the effect that, if we are talking about a right independent of what people do, it is hard to see on what basis it can be *unequal*. This will not satisfy the kind of racist who says that some people have superior claims not in virtue of anything they have ever done but simply intrinsi-

cally, in virtue of who they are. But it should be good enough for anyone else.

But what does this equal right cover? At this point, I want to strike out on my own and suggest that it should be taken as covering anything having the characteristic that nothing anyone does gives that person any special claim on it. As a prime example, I would offer the case of natural resources, considered in themselves lying in the earth's crust or wherever. Is there anything that, in the absence of some convention or rule, constitutes an act of appropriation? In this land of devout Lockeans I expect the answer "By mixing one's labor with it." But in fact, Locke's fundamental premise was that the earth was given to all men in common, and the "mixing one's labor" criterion for appropriation was put forward as a way of trying to show how one avoided the conclusion that "men must starve," in the absence of universal consent. Now, as a practical way of putting into effect the equal right principle, the Lockean system would perhaps be acceptable under the very restrictive conditions stipulated by Locke. I want to leave open at this point the question of how to implement the principle that the earth is "the common heritage of mankind." The principle itself seems to me pretty hard to deny. In practice, we tend to notice the arbitrary nature of the principle of national sovereignty over natural resources only in the most extreme cases, such as countries in the Persian Gulf with small populations and large oil revenues. But once cases like that set us thinking, I would hope that we would see that the principle itself is without any rational foundation.

Natural resources provide a relatively straightforward application of the idea that what nobody can make any special claim on everybody has an equal claim on. But of course most of the disparities in national prosperity are not accounted for by the abundance or lack of natural resources. They flow, rather, from differences in the stock of productive capital, in the infrastructure of transport and communications facilities, and in the training and

education of the work force, the abilities of managers, and so on. Where does our principle fit in here?

It seems to me that there are three points to be made in this connection, each of which has quite different implications, and that somehow we must give weight to all three in arriving at a final judgement. The first is that there is no country that is well off by world standards (say an annual income of \$4,000 per head or more) in which the current generation can claim all the credit for their prosperity. In every such country *either* the level of income arises from large oil revenues divided among a relatively small population or it owes a great deal to inherited human and physical capital. In other words, saying “we deserve it because we worked for it” is never strictly true, unless the “we” is tacitly extended back to earlier generations.

The second point is that, in spite of the importance of inherited advantages, we should still be willing to give people credit for making efforts themselves. Not everybody can become a world-class swimmer. You need an appropriate physique and access to a swimming pool, and it no doubt helps to have good coaching, supportive parents, and all the rest. But out of all the people who have those advantages, only a few actually put in the necessary hours of practice. Perhaps, as Professor Rawls suggested in *A Theory of Justice*, even the ability to make an effort is the result of some favorable combination of genes and environment — but the fact remains that the effort has to be made. Capital equipment and a skilled work force do not produce anything unless the work force applies itself to the equipment with a certain diligence. If, say, British workers want slower assembly lines and longer tea breaks than German workers, it seems perfectly reasonable that they should also accept a lower material standard of living, and I would hypothesize that one of the reasons for the lack of noticeable discontent in Britain with the country’s relative (though not absolute) decline in per capita income in recent decades is that this is widely recognized, at least at an intuitive level.

The third point is a very difficult one to deal with in a short space of time, but I will say something about it all the same. It may be argued that we are making a mistake if we focus our attention exclusively on the present generation and say that their good fortune in inheriting an effective productive structure is something for which they cannot claim any special credit. For inheriting a productive structure is not like sitting atop a huge lake of oil. It is man-made even if not by those currently alive. If we say that it arises from the efforts of previous generations of people in that country, does it not follow that they should be able to determine the beneficiaries of their efforts? This suggestion raises a host of difficult questions. How should posthumous wishes be treated? What *did* past generations expect to happen as a result of their efforts? And to what extent were their efforts directed at making life easier for their descendants anyway? Because time is short, I shall finesse these questions, for the present purpose, by saying that I think it would be hard to come up with answers to them that would imply an absolute right among the present generation in any wealthy country to enjoy exclusively the advantages they inherit.

Different people will no doubt be impressed to different degrees by the three points I have just raised, so they will tend to come out in rather different places when it comes to drawing implications from them for the obligations of rich countries to poor ones. I shall, however, suggest two minimal recommendations that seem to me to follow from the principle of equal rights—minimal in that they leave current property relations intact: and merely make incremental changes in the distribution of the benefits arising from those relations. The first, which flows from equal rights to natural resources, is an international severance tax on the extraction of natural resources, the proceeds to be distributed to resource-poor countries. And the second, which flows from the extension of the principle to inherited advantages, is an international income tax, levied on countries with a per

capita GNP of (say) \$4,000 a year and up, and distributed to countries with (say) annual incomes of \$1,500 a head or less. It seems to me that these two forms of tax must have the effect of redressing injustice by moving things in the right direction, though there remains room for disagreement as to how far they should go and whether additional measures would be desirable.

In order to proceed, I shall take it that justice does require international transfers from resource-rich to resource-poor countries, and from countries with high average incomes to those with low average incomes, and then address two issues that arise. The first question is this. It may be recalled that I said earlier that justice, unlike humanity, had institutional and normative presuppositions. Justice as reciprocity entails the existence of an ongoing set of normatively-controlled relationships. One does not advance the cause of justice as reciprocity by conferring benefits that are not, when the relevant time comes, reciprocated in whatever is the appropriate way.

What about justice as equal rights? Now, the notion of justice as equal rights does not in itself, it seems to me, entail the existence of institutions for its application. An exchange of apples now for oranges in the future requires an institution of promising. But to divide equally an apple between two people with an equal claim on it requires no more than a sharp knife. Clearly, however, the full implementation of a system of global transfers based on the two criteria that I have proposed would indeed require the existence of institutions that do not now exist.

What follows from this? Obviously that they ought to be brought into existence. This sounds, perhaps, a hopelessly utopian thing to say. I cannot here undertake to analyse this charge in any detail, But let me offer two remarks. First, the institutions do partly exist, imperfect and inadequate as they may be. I point for an example to the increase in Special Drawing Rights for poor countries that has been carried through in the International Monetary Fund. The poor countries propose to put this on a regular

basis rather than regard it as a one-off change. The rich countries have recently blocked this, but it seems clear that a mechanism for the regular and systematic transfer of funds could be worked out without any revolutionary transformation of the international monetary order. The second observation I want to make is that we should adopt a sensible time perspective in judging the feasibility of large-scale changes. We should be thinking in decades and even centuries. Within countries, the welfare state and redistributive taxation have come about as the administrative capacity of the state and the accepted ideas about its role have developed *pari passu* over the past hundred years. I can see no reason why the same should not happen in a wider sphere. Indeed, by those domestic standards, the growth of international institutions in the past thirty years is rather fast. And so too is the rise in the idea of international redistribution itself, from something almost unheard of in 1950 to the common currency of North–South exchanges in 1980.

There is a second aspect of the proposal for international transfers that I want to take up, and that is that I make countries rather than individuals the units of redistribution. The taxes will, I assume, be levied on countries, which will then collect them through their own tax systems; and they will be paid to countries, where they will operate in effect as a relaxation of constraints on imports.

The objection that is liable to be made to this is that in principle justice should be regarded as a relation between individuals. States may have to be accepted as intermediate instruments in the move towards a just world economic order, defined at an individual level, but no more than that. The implication drawn from this is usually that countries that do not use the additional resources in an equitable way internally should not receive them.

My answer to this is that it fails to appreciate the difference between justice and humanity as grounds for making transfers. Humanity is a principle that is indeed to be defined at the indi-

vidual level, because a transfer either relieves suffering or not, and suffering is a predicate of individuals. A transfer which increases resources (either of an individual or a collectivity) but which does not relieve the suffering of some person or persons has not achieved its end. Hence, incidentally, the attraction to donors of aid with strings or in kind rather than cash. By contrast with this, justice has as its subject-matter the distribution of resources. It is concerned with the way in which rights and powers are allocated. And rights, powers, or resources may be attributes of collectivities as well as attributes of individuals, There is therefore no incoherence in saying that justice may be defined over two — or indeed any number of — levels. We can talk about the justice of distribution between countries, and also the justice of distribution within countries. There is no a priori reason for supposing that a just distribution between countries can be deduced directly from considering what would be a just distribution among four billion or so individuals, regarded as if they were not the members of various collectivities (including countries) with decision-making power over the disposition of various resources.

In this context, it is worth noting that in practice we do not really think about the distribution of income *within* countries as a distribution among individuals but among families (except when we are not thinking concretely and individualistic ideology takes over). In no country, for example, does social policy treat someone as indigent even if he or she has no personal income at all, so long as he or she is married to and living with someone who does have a substantial income. In practice, we do adopt a two-level approach. Social policy is concerned almost exclusively with the distribution of incomes among families (either in wages or social benefits), and the distribution of those resources within families is left pretty much to those families. If we regard families as decision-making units entitled to some autonomy as to their internal arrangements, I can see no reason why we should refuse to extend the same standing to countries.

That is not to say that no international pressure on states is ever warranted, but again the domestic parallel holds. If a man spends all his wages on drink with the result that his wife and children go without food and clothing, that is not simply his business but the public's. But the appropriate reaction is *not* to refuse to pay him his wages or renege on debts that are owed to him. Yet the proposal that transfers should be denied to poor countries with inequitable internal arrangements is exactly analogous to that. Countries are, if I am right, owed transfers as a matter of right, and there is no more reason for withholding transfers than there is currently thought to be for refusing to pay for imports from such a country. (There is also no less — withholding transfers would be legitimate where the freezing of assets would be.) The advisability or otherwise of international intervention to press for greater justice within a country is left open by what I have said about international justice. It certainly is not ruled out.

I have deliberately eschewed any appeal in this lecture to self-interest as a reason for rich countries making transfers to poor ones. It may appear to some people that this dooms the case I have made to futility. I do not believe this. Let me in conclusion very briefly say why.

It is a matter of record that, although a number of industrial countries have reduced the proportion of their GNP going to foreign economic aid in recent years, the most precipitous decline has occurred in the USA's contribution, which has now fallen to less than one fifth of one percent of GNP. And the USA is a country in which the case for foreign aid has been almost exclusively argued for in terms of the American national interest. Conversely, the countries which have actually improved their record in recent years — Scandinavia and the Netherlands — are those in which aid to poor countries has been presented most strongly as a moral obligation. This provides some simple empirical support for the proposition that, as a sheer matter of practical politics, moral appeals may be more effective than appeals to self-interest.

The fact is, I think, that it is genuinely uncertain whether or not the self-interest of rich countries, either individually or collectively, calls for substantial economic transfers to poor ones. This is partly a question of the difficulty of establishing causal linkages on the scale and over the time-span required. Suppose that it is claimed (as it sometimes is) that the continuation of the status quo with respect to transfers will lead by the end of the century to "turmoil in the third world." How exactly does poverty lead to turmoil? To what sort of turmoil? And how would that affect the rich countries, on a variety of assumptions about the measures they might take to defend themselves against adverse consequences? Similar problems arise through the whole catalogue of possible effects.

But there is a deeper reason for uncertainty, and this lies in the inadequacy of the concept of interest when it is confronted with an issue of this nature. The concept of self-interest works best in contexts where a choice has to be made within a well-defined framework. Given my tastes, aspirations, and circumstances, should I take this job or that one? But in choosing whether or not to make serious transfers to the poor countries, we are choosing between alternative worlds that will increasingly diverge as time goes on, and choosing not just for ourselves but for our children and their children, whose tastes, aspirations, and circumstances will be different in those different worlds. The supposed definiteness of the question dissolves, and in the end we can do little more than ask "Which world would we prefer for ourselves and our descendants?" And when the question is posed in those terms, I think that the attractions of a less unequal world are not to be despised.

Let me finally raise the question to a higher level of generality. I am far from underestimating the force of economic self-interest in human affairs. But, for better or for worse, large-scale collective action normally arises in response to ideas rather than interests. This is often for worse rather than better. Take your pick

of the worst blots on human history—the Spanish Inquisition, the Holocaust, or almost any war in the past two centuries — and it will be hard to conclude that with rational, self-interested people on all sides they could have occurred. Bertrand Russell used to say that, if people would really pursue their interests intelligently, the world would be a lot better place than it is. And there is much to be said for that view.

But since in fact people are swayed by ideas as well as by interests, it is as well that there is a brighter side to the picture. General ideas can give rise to movements that are liberating rather than destructive. The best example is the anti-slavery movement in Britain and America. British parliaments voted first to ban the slave trade (which was quite lucrative) and then to abolish slavery everywhere in the British Empire, with compensation from tax revenues for slave owners. As far as the USA is concerned, I have no wish to blunder into the historical minefield of “the causes of the Civil War.” But I hope it is reasonably uncontroversial to say that the revulsion against slavery in the North made the pre-Civil War settlement increasingly fragile.

In both countries, the opposition to slavery was, I think, almost entirely based on the moral sentiment that it was wrong. World poverty is not as dramatic an issue as slavery. And a longer, more complex, train of moral reasoning is required to arrive at the conclusion that the coexistence of desperate deprivation in some countries alongside superfluity in others is a moral indecency of the same order. I do believe, however, that, if such a conviction can be inculcated in enough people, we have reason for hoping that results will follow. Anyway, I hope so.