Poverty

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Introduction

Every year, millions of people die prematurely from poverty-related causes such as malaria, lack of clean water, and malnutrition. This makes tens of thousands of deaths per day. Many of those who die are children under the age of five. From an ethical point of view, there is little doubt that extreme poverty is a bad thing and should be eradicated. This view can be defended by various ways, for instance, by referring to the utilitarian doctrine that suffering is a bad thing, or by referring to the golden rule or categorical imperative, or by referring to the view that we all have natural rights against poverty, or by referring to virtue ethics (as virtuous persons try to help those who suffer), or by referring to the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights. The view that extreme poverty should be eradicated is compatible with the claim that not all people in the planet should enjoy equal living standards. Global egalitarianism is not the issue here, and the view that extreme poverty is a bad thing is a very weak claim that almost everyone can accept. Those who deny it may have environmental concerns in mind and think that extreme poverty is a welcome phenomenon as it kills a lot of people and hence decreases the number of consumers of natural resources. However, it is not clear whether this argument is a *moral* argument at all, and in any case, this chapter is based on the normative assumption that extreme poverty should be eradicated. The real problem is that there is no agreement about what should be done. Not all actions are feasible and productive, and those that are can be ethically doubtful. Extreme poverty raises difficult ethical and philosophical questions. This chapter deals with the following ones. How to define poverty? What is the point of the Millennium Declaration? What is the value of development aid? Can poor countries help themselves? Is poverty possibly based on a self-fulfilling prophecy? How poverty and population growth are related to each other? What should be the role of genetically modified food in the war against extreme poverty? Let us start with the problem of a definition.

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Absolute and Relative Poverty

It is customary to distinguish between absolute and relative poverty. Absolute poverty refers to a criterion that is universal and makes international comparisons possible. Relative poverty views poverty as context dependent and is closely related to the assessments of social inequalities. Poverty is related to issues such as health, education, violence, a sense of security, housing conditions, political power, population growth, and hunger. Extreme poverty is seldom voluntary, and people who suffer from extreme poverty cannot always satisfy their basic wants such as a need for food, water, shelter, basic education, minimal medical care, and self-respect.

There is no agreement about the proper definition of poverty in either sense. In the *Encyclopedia of Global Justice* 2011a, b, Teppo Eskelinen writes both about absolute and relative poverty. He points out that definitions of absolute poverty often rely on a certain understanding of basic needs and that this is problematic as we do not know, exactly, what our "basic needs" are. (Eskelinen, 2011a). It is doubtful whether they are *only* biological needs (cf. Gasper, 2004). In practice, the attempts to measure the number of people living in absolute poverty have been based on financial measurements. A poverty line is defined, and persons falling under this line are classified as poor. The most used poverty lines are expressed in US dollars (for instance, $1.08 per day for extreme poverty), and these lines have been defined by the World Bank. As Eskelinen (2011a) points out, the figures do not refer to actual dollars but to purchasing power. Typically, the purpose of poverty reduction is to raise poor people above a poverty line, not to make income distribution more equal or to increase the overall living standards in poor countries. Eskelinen (2011a) argues that this policy is often defended by the ethical argument that absolute poverty generates duties for affluent countries to alleviate poverty, while less severe forms of poverty do not generate similar obligations.

Relative poverty is a context-dependent concept, and a person can be poor in a relative sense while not being poor in an absolute sense. Eskelinen (2011b) argues that relative poverty is seen as a matter of failure of distributive justice, while absolute poverty is seen as a failure of meeting the requirements of basic dignity of human beings or human rights. Both relative poverty and absolute poverty relate to the issues of global justice, but in different ways. Relative poverty can be understood mainly as a psychological concept that refers to people's expectations and desires. When certain goods become common in a society and people are expected to have these goods, then not having them may lead to a feeling of being poor, whether or not the goods in question are, in any meaningful sense, "necessary." Eskelinen (2011b) points out that it is possible that some things become necessities for living in a society and that the inability to acquire such goods is not merely a matter of unmet wants. For example, transportation can be possible by only specific technological solutions, and the failure to access these can lead to relative poverty in a sense which refers to more than mere wants or expectations. Relative property is not merely a psychological concept (Eskelinen, 2011b).

Millennium Declaration

There is no doubt that people are familiar with the fact of extreme poverty. The main purpose of the United Nations' *Millennium Declaration* is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger (cf. Hutchings, 2010). According to the Declaration, accepted by General Assembly, the goal is "[t]o halve, by the year 2015, the proportion of the world's people whose income is less than one dollar a day and the proportion of people who suffer from hunger and, by the same date, to halve the proportion of people who are unable to reach or to afford safe drinking water."

How can this be done? The Declaration lists, *inter alia*, the following means. The industrialized countries should (1) adopt a policy of duty- and quota-free access for essentially all exports from the least developed countries, (2) implement the enhanced program of debt relief for the heavily indebted poor countries without further delay and agree to cancel all official bilateral debts of those countries in return for their making demonstrable commitments to poverty reduction, and (3) grant more generous development assistance, especially to countries that are genuinely making an effort to apply their resources to poverty reduction.

Critics have argued that the goal of the Declaration is modest. Why is the purpose only to *halve* the number (or the percentage) of people who live in extreme poverty? And why is the time period fifteen years? (The Declaration was made in 2000.) The defenders have replied that more demanding goals would be unrealistic and unfeasible, and perhaps the view is justified, judging from the fact that even the realization of this "modest" goal has turned out to be difficult. It is important to note that the above-mentioned means of eradicating poverty – i.e., (1) fair trade, (2) debt relief, and (3) more intensive development assistance – do not *oblige* any country to carry them out. They are based on every country's voluntary efforts. Fair trade, debt relief, and development assistance are very complex tools, and one can use them counterproductively as the history of development assistance shows. For instance, when a rich country gives grain for a poor country for free it may cause permanent damage to local farmers, agriculture, and food production.

The Value of Development Aid

It is relatively widespread to doubt the value of development assistance. This doubt is often expressed not only in daily debates concerning development aid, but also in academic writing. In his *Despite Good Intentions – Why Development Assistance to the Third World Has Failed* (2003), Thomas W. Dichter argues that it is impossible to eradicate global poverty, because development assistance does not and cannot work properly. Dichter (2003, p. ix) writes that he has "doubts about the value of development assistance" and that he knows of no organization that really accomplishes much in the way of sustained alleviation of poverty or promotes real development or does exactly what it told the public it would do. According to Dichter (2003, p. xi), his "concern is to show not so much *why* development

assistance does not work (. . .) but *how* it does not work" (although the subtitle of the book is the former question). He does, however, have an explanation for the mystery why it does not work – and why it cannot work. The explanation has two, closely linked, parts.

The first part of the explanation is based on the idea that institutions are "slow" – they do not change easily – and that the *development industry* is an institution which changes very slowly, if at all. Dichter (2003, p. 2) asks "[w]hy has an industry that since 1960 has spent over $1.7 trillion on development assistance, by any commonsense cost-benefit calculus, produced negligible results (if not made things worse)?" and points out that "[n]o other large-scale publicly funded effort on such duration could have got away with such poor performance, certainly not in the private sector or even in the ranks of government" (Dichter, 2003, p. 2). Dichter's answer is that aid has become a business whose main stake is its own survival. But this is not to say that organizations or people who work in them have bad intentions. Dichter (2003, p. xiii) writes:

> Most development professionals I have met possess very high ideals about the work they do. But because no one has to date been funded to do development work outside the structure of an organization, those good intentions and ideals get twisted, bent and reshaped. Development professionals have, almost all of us, become caught in the evolution of a set of increasingly self-serving structures whose imperatives, stakes, and incentives have snuck up on us, sometimes so quietly that we have not noticed. If we haven't seen how much those structures limit and compromise development, it's partly because we are in fact so sincere and partly because it is not in our interests to do so.

The second part of the explanation consists of the claim that it is impossible to do anything good by becoming involved in a strange culture and a foreign political system. Development industry denies the validity of this claim or ignores it. One cannot control historical processes. Dichter (2003, p. 7, 9) explains:

> The keys to development increasingly lie in the realm of the policies, laws, and institutions of a society, and to change these requires indirect kinds of approaches – stimulating, fostering, convincing – rather than doing things directly. Why is it, then, that the majority of development assistance organizations continue to "do" things? And why do more and more come into existence every day with funding to do still more things? (. . .) The problems of development are far too complex for any organized and deliberate effort to solve in any lasting way. Development is not a set of obstinate problems the way cancer is but a historical process that cannot really be engineered or controlled.

Dichter's (2003, p. 19) conclusion is pessimistic. According to him, a formally organized, publicly paid for, outsider-driven industry can accomplish "very little." Whatever "few things it may make sense for 'us' to do for 'them', must be done with a light hand. These things, moreover, will have few easily measurable effects, will surely take far *less* money than is presently being applied, and will involve far fewer and much smaller organizations to manage them" (Dichter, 2003, p. 19).

One might argue, however, that Dichter's pessimism is based on an exaggeration. Although it is easy to agree that the development business is growing and that it is often difficult to influence historical processes from outside, it seems clear that even if institutions are "slow," this does not imply that they are unchangeable.

History provides a number of examples of stable institutions which have radically changed structurally – either because of a catastrophe, such as war, or because of intentional external pressure or a radical change in the financial situation. Development industry may well change. It is worth noting that development organizations do *not* get as much money as they are supposed to get. The claim that it is impossible to influence the cultural and political life of a given society from the outside is familiar from the debate on humanitarian interventions, and it seems that the acceptability of the claim should be assessed on case-by-case basis.

It is important to note that no country lives quite separately from others and that influencing the affairs of other countries from outside is something which happens all the time. To say that a development industry intervenes in the political processes of developing countries with no chance of success is to suggest that otherwise those countries are not influenced by the industrialized world and are left untouched. Indeed, Dichter's account seems to be based on the explanation of global poverty that is perhaps the most popular one, namely, the claim that the eradication of severe poverty in the Third World depends largely on their local governments and that wrong decisions explain why the countries are poor. This assumption can be and has been challenged.

Can Poor Countries Help Themselves?

In his article on global order and democracy, published in 2001, Thomas Pogge (2001, p. 333) argues that "our global order plays an important part in sustaining oppression and corruption in the poorer countries." Oppression and corruption, in turn, "cause not only poverty in the developing world, but also moral detachment among the affluent." Pogge is especially concerned about the so-called *international borrowing privilege*, i.e., a right of any Third World government to negotiate loans from international financial markets. He (2001, p. 335) suggests that the "international borrowing privilege has three important negative side effects on the corruption and poverty problems in the developing world." They are as follows: (1) The privilege facilitates borrowing by destructive governments and helps such governments to maintain themselves in power even against near universal popular discontent and opposition. (2) The international borrowing privilege often imposes huge debts accumulated by earlier corrupt regimes upon their democratic successors. It thereby saps the capacity of such democratic governments to implement structural reforms and other political programs. (3) The international borrowing privilege further strengthens the incentives at attempting a coup: whoever succeeds in bringing a preponderance of the means of coercion under his control obtains the borrowing privilege as an additional reward.

How we should try to eradicate poverty? Pogge's main idea is the Global Resource Dividend which, in some respects, resembles the proposal called the Tobin Tax (i.e., a tax for currency transactions in order to collect money for poor countries). According to the Global Resource Dividend, states and their governments shall not have full libertarian property rights with respect to the natural

resources in their territory, but can be required to share a small part of the value of any resources they decide to use or sell. However, Pogge also stresses that the democratic governments of poor countries can do something *themselves*, without complex global redistribution systems such as a Tobin Tax or a Global Resource Dividend. The governments can support democratic development, oppose corruption, and possibly stop the borrowing privilege by local efforts. What is needed is a *constitutional amendment* which says that loans that are borrowed by authoritarian rulers need not be paid back to international banks. In his *World Poverty and Human Rights* (2002, pp. 153–154) Pogge writes that

> There are (...) ways of affecting the dispositions of foreign states in ways that would, without violence, reduce the rewards of, and would thereby tend to discourage, an undemocratic takeover. One such measure is a constitutional amendment requiring that debts incurred by future unconstitutional governments – by rulers who will acquire or exercise power in violation of our democratic constitution – must not be serviced at public expense. The idea behind this amendment is to bring it about that successful predators will be able to borrow less, and this at higher rates. If it can achieve this purpose, the amendment would stabilize our fledging democratic order by reducing the payoff associated with a successful coup d'état and thereby weakening the incentives for attempting such a coup in the first place.

Of course, after a successful coup authoritarian rulers can simply declare the amendment suspended, but should they eventually lose power, the democratic government that succeeds them can nonetheless refuse repayment of their debts on the grounds that the coup was illegal (cf. Räikkä, 2006).

Would international banks grant loans to the future authoritarian governments in this situation? According to Pogge (2002, p. 154), they would not. The banks could not be sure that the governments of their home countries would support them in case they did not regain their money. They would know that their governments (i.e., governments of rich democracies) might refuse to help them exactly because of the amendment made by democratic rulers. "Serious public-relations problems, both home and abroad, could arise" if the governments of rich democracies openly supported authoritarian laws above democratic constitution of a poor country. Therefore, if the constitutional amendment were in place, international banks would grant loans only to democratic governments, not to authoritarian rulers. The borrowing privilege – the main cause of corruption and poverty – would be eliminated.

Pogge does not explain why banks of *undemocratic* rich countries would not grant loans to the future authoritarian governments. However, he provides a rather detailed analysis of the constitutional amendment, and he answers other difficult questions such as how to distinguish between democratic and authoritarian governments ("the criterial problem"), and what should be done if the possible authoritarian successors refuse to pay debts of democratic governments ("the tit-for-tat problem"). Pogge (2002, pp. 156–161) argues that we should have (1) a *Democracy Panel* that identifies democratic governments and (2) a *Democracy Fund* that guarantees that debts of democratic governments will always be repaid to international banks. These claims suggest that the functioning of the constitutional amendment is *not* really in the hands of an individual government. Rather, it depends on international support as would be the case with the Tobin Tax or the Global Resource Dividend.

This raises the question whether it is likely that the governments of the powerful rich democracies would readily agree to establish the Democracy Panel and support financially the Democracy Fund. After all, the Democracy Fund would cost much, and rich countries have no incentive to oppose dictators who sell at giveaway prices the natural resources of their land (and keep the money). Pogge admits that some of the governments of the rich democracies would probably object to the constitutional amendment, claiming that it would cause too much instability to international financial systems. In Pogge's (2002, p.160) view, however, this claim is plainly false. The constitutional amendment would engender instability only if rich countries refused to support the necessary institutions related to it, and anyone defending the opposite claim would be seen in a bad light "in the arena of world public opinion." This would reduce pressure by the rich countries against the constitutional amendment.

Pogge's argument seems to rely on the same assumptions as the whole idea of the constitutional amendment, namely, (1) that "public relations" and "public opinion" can have significant effects on the decisions of the governments of rich democracies and (2) that public opinion would condemn actions that contradict democratic development in the poor countries. Pogge argues further that, in fact, the support of the most powerful democratic countries is unnecessary. The Democracy Fund can be financed in another way. He (2002, p.161) writes that the "capital facility needed for the Democracy Fund can be financed through contributions by democratic developing countries, by the more progressive developed democracies, by international organizations, and by contributions from banks and multinational corporations."

Pogge's critics (Räikkä, 2006; Jaggar, 2010) have pointed out that the credibility of this argument depends on how much money is needed to finance the Democracy Fund. If a group of other powerful rich countries oppose the constitutional amendment and the institutions related to it, the Democracy Fund will probably be a very weak and poor organization. It can be argued that international organizations (such as the United Nations and WTO) or banks (such as the IMF and the World Bank) will not give any money to the Democracy Fund, if powerful countries so decide. It is likely that multinational corporations (such as Nokia and Shell) will not endanger their position by opposing world leading countries, and the same is true of "more progressive developed democracies." It is hard to imagine that countries such as Sweden or Norway would strongly support an institution which is explicitly criticized by their powerful allies.

Pogge has recently defended his position for instance in *Politics as Usual* (2010).

Poverty as a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

There has been a tendency to explain global poverty by referring to the selfishness of the citizens of affluent countries. For instance, in *One World: The Ethics of Globalization* (2002, pp. 152–153), Peter Singer argues that "for many people,

the circle of concern for others stops at the boundaries of their own nation" and that the popular view is that we may, or even should, favor those "of our own kind." An alternative to this view is the idea that the question is about an unfortunate *self-fulfilling prophecy*. The theory states that most people in the affluent countries *believe* that for one reason or another it is practically *impossible* to eradicate poverty, and that this shared belief *itself* may be a cause for why it is practically impossible to eradicate it in the near future. The only cause for global poverty need not be the alleged selfishness of people. It is possible that the main cause is a commonly shared belief that it is impossible to eradicate poverty from the Third World, which influences people's behavior. Behavior that may seem selfish need not be selfish, if it is based on the pessimism regarding the possibilities of success.

There are several reasons why people think that it is practically impossible to get rid of global extreme poverty. Academic literature and daily newspapers are both full of arguments that aim to show that a fight against poverty would be a politically unfeasible project. A person who believes in one or other of these arguments needs not be selfish in any way. The familiar arguments include the following claims:

1. *The Argument Based on Population Growth*. It is impossible to reduce poverty effectively, because increased well-being would cause overpopulation, which in turn would decrease well-being. Famine, diseases, and a high infant mortality rate prevent population growth. There would not be enough food to feed a larger population. Genetically modified organisms that can be used in agriculture will never save people from starving.

2. *The Environmental Argument*. Global equality would cause huge environmental problems. Not everyone in the world can have a car. In the long run, pollution and other environmental problems would make living for human beings impossible, at least in most areas. Therefore, it is practically impossible to eradicate poverty in any meaningful sense.

3. *The Blame Approach*. It is impossible for Western countries to save people in the Third World from starving, because famine and suffering are their own fault. Foreign aid does not work, because the money is used, not for schools, but for dictators' Cadillacs and castles. There is no way of solving military conflicts between local groups and clans, and these conflicts are one of the main reasons for poverty. The idea of exporting democracy from the outside is a joke.

4. *The Not Enough Money Approach*. It is an unfeasible idea that people in the West could really eradicate poverty. This would be impossible because it would be far too expensive, not only in the sense that people would not be happy to give away what they have but in a concrete sense that there simply would not be enough resources to do so. To feed every single person in the world requires not only food – which is not expensive – but also roads, schools, and dozens of local uncorrupted organizations that simply do not exist.

5. *The Argument from Political Realism*. It is impossible to reduce poverty, because nation-states are selfish actors – even if their individual citizens are not. Nation-states would never create international organizations that have

power to really do something for the Third World. Nation-states act on the basis of *political realism*, and they are happy with organizations such as the United Nations, which will never have sufficient power to reduce poverty.

6. *The Technical Argument*. The idea of eradicating poverty from the world is technically unfeasible, at least in the near future. Even if there were enough money and enough political willingness to fight for global equality, it would not work. This is because there are no redistributive structures. To dream of systems such as the Tobin tax is to ignore the fact that redistribution requires not only complex civil servant machinery but also an effective system of sanctions and courts to solve cases. At the moment, we do not have them.

7. *The Argument from Multinational Corporations*. Multinational corporations, by their nature, are largely independent of the political decisions of the nation-states in which they operate, and also of their home countries. Multinational corporations are not interested in reducing poverty. On the contrary, in a sense they are interested in increasing it, because they try to benefit from the poverty in the countries in which they operate. Currently, there is no political way of controlling multinational corporations, and this is why it is practically impossible to reduce poverty or to prevent inequality from increasing.

8. *The Argument from Value Pluralism*. Suppose that rich countries would decide to fight for moderate global equality and redistribute resources. How should those resources be distributed? Should we use Scandinavian standards, or North American, or maybe Saudi Arabian? There are no globally shared standards of (re)distribution, and therefore, there is no chance of distributing them in any way.

The list of arguments for the claim that it is practically impossible to eradicate global poverty is much longer than the list above. What seems common to all these arguments, however, is that they are controversial. (Indeed, one might claim that most of them are plainly false). Even so, it seems clear that they are very popular – judging from the frequency of these arguments.

A self-fulfilling prophecy is a description of the situation that becomes true because of the actions performed as a result of the public acceptance of the prophecy. When an economist presumes that prices will go up in the housing market in the near future and reveals his opinions in public, the result may be that prices will indeed go up – and just because people try to buy a house before the prices do go up. The public announcement and the common acceptance of the prophecy make it come true. The discussion on self-fulfilling prophecies has centered on the difficulty of making predictions in the social sciences. It is hard to make predictions of social life and *test* theories, because predictions influence the data that are supposed to confirm or disprove those theories. Social predictions may possess a reflexive force. They may make themselves true (or untrue).

What could be the route from the widely shared belief that poverty in the Third World is a necessity to the possible fact that it *is* a necessity? There are several possible reasons why the claim that global inequality is unavoidable could be a typical self-fulfilling prophecy. (Cf. Räikkä, 2004). When people believe that it is practically impossible to get rid of global inequality, they might be politically passive in issues related to foreign aid. Perhaps they do not vote for politicians that

are interested in global justice. Perhaps they do not participate in the actions of different nongovernmental organizations that pursue a better world. They could give more donations or join the one percent movement. They could do voluntary work in the poor states. They could take part in an action such as "Sponsor a Child." They could start new organizations that fight against poverty in the Third World. But why should they if such actions are futile? When people believe that poverty is unavoidable, there is little pressure on national governments. And why should governments try to do something which is impossible?

Of course, not all people believe that poverty is a necessity, and there are many active citizens who really try to do *something*. Indeed, the belief that it is practically impossible to get rid of poverty is compatible with the idea that there is much that we can do. Thus, even the majority who seem to accept the *impossibility thesis* may be willing to do something, because they realize that something is better than nothing. But still it may be the case that eradicating poverty from the Third World is extremely difficult mainly because of people's pessimism.

The claim that global inequality can – at least partly – be explained by referring to the unfortunate self-fulfilling prophecy should be distinguished from the claim that people (and states) hesitate to fight against poverty because they are afraid that others will not. The so-called compliance problem, as the latter claim is often called, is important, but it is not directly related to the self-fulfilling prophecies. Rather, the compliance problem provides an alternative way of explaining why people do not do good things even if they would like to.

Poverty and Population Growth

Extreme poverty and population growth are closely related as poverty tends to enlarge family size. The growth of world population raises two kinds of normative questions. First, there are questions of intergenerational justice. How should welfare be distributed across generations? What kind of theoretical framework should we construct to deal with future generations? Second, there are ethical questions of population policy. Since determining the number of people in the world is partly a matter of individual and social choice, it is subject to moral evaluation. What are desirable goals of population policies? Which means are morally acceptable when striving for these goals? How should the burden of achieving a demographic goal be distributed? Questions of intergenerational justice and the ethics of population policies are interrelated in various ways, but it is important to note that intergenerational justice concerns current and *future people*, i.e., people who will live in the future, while the ethics of population policies concern *potential people*, i.e., entities that have the potential to become a person, and *possible people*, i.e., people who will live in the future if we so decide.

Certain population policies have caused serious social and moral problems. Eugenics and sterilization were widely used both in Europe and North America in the twentieth century. Contraceptives have had unknown side effects, and women have not been fully informed of their health risks. Especially in the Third World

countries coercion of women has been a general feature of many population policies. Control-oriented policies have been much more common than service-oriented policies. Compensation payments have linked sterilization and abortion to poverty, highlighting, and increasing social inequality. Certain policies have led to sex selection and to the killing of female newborns. These kinds of problems may suggest that active population policies are morally problematic *per se*, but a *laissez faire* population policy – a policy of nonaction – may cause serious problems too.

In general, there is a relatively good understanding of what should be done to reduce family size in areas of rapid population growth. We may, *inter alia*, try to increase social approval of small families, to cut down the opportunities for children to be productively employed, to make social security available for the elderly, to reduce the costs of contraception, to increase knowledge of contraceptive techniques, to improve social standards involved in the raising of children, to increase the cost of products used by children, to educate young women, to create well-paid jobs for young women, to speed up urbanization, and to impose mandatory education for children where the cost of this education is partly paid by parents. The most effective means to reduce family size would be to eradicate extreme poverty, since poverty causes population growth.

Are coercive population policies ever morally justified? A received view is that ethically acceptable population policies let individuals freely decide the number of their children and that we are permitted to strive for demographic goals only by policies that are noncoercive. However, an argument has been made that if there is no way to slow down the population growth other than using *directly coercive* laws, such laws may be morally justified (Attfield, 1999, p. 128). Those who sympathize with this view emphasize that population growth is inconsistent with the ideals of sustainable development and contributes significantly to environmental, ecological, and social problems in certain areas.

It is not clear whether we should prefer *indirectly coercive* population policies to directly coercive ones if we wished to respect procreative rights. Much depends on the *content* of such indirectly coercive policies. Suppose that there is a law (direct policy) that prohibits having more than two children, but that nothing really happens if one has more than two children. Compare this law to an economic deterrent (indirect policy) that in practice makes it inadvisable to have more than two children. In this case the direct policy seems less problematic than the indirect policy. Consider another example. Suppose there is a law (direct policy) that prohibits having more than three children, and that acting against this law implies heavy penalties. Compare this policy to an economic incentive (indirect policy) that in practice makes it impossible to have more than one child. Again, the direct policy is less problematic than the indirect policy. Compare now a law that restricts the number of children in families (direct policy), and an economic incentive that makes it impossible for poor people to have children and encourages rich people to have them (indirect policy). At least from the point of view of equality, once again the direct policy seems less problematic (cf. Räikkä, 2001).

Population theory has generated a number of philosophical paradoxes and puzzles. A famous puzzle is Derek Parfit's reasoning that classical utilitarianism (i.e., the

"total theory") implies the "Repugnant Conclusion." As formulated by Parfit, the repugnant conclusion is the claim that for "any possible population of at least ten billion people, all with a very high quality of life, there must be some much larger imaginable population whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better, even though its members have lives that are barely worth living." According to (the hedonistic version of) classical utilitarianism, it is a good thing to maximize happiness as long as persons' happiness exceeds their misery and adds to the total sum of happiness on Earth. As long as average happiness declines slowly enough, numbers under classical utilitarianism are encouraged to increase indefinitely no matter how low the average has fallen. But most of us think that this kind of overcrowded world is not the ideal world. There are many ways to react to Parfit's argument. One can simply reject classical utilitarianism, or one may try to show that classical utilitarianism does not lead to the repugnant conclusion or, biting the bullet, one may claim that the repugnant conclusion is not so repugnant. However, it is important to keep in mind that poverty-related overpopulation (and birth control that has followed it) have caused much pain and trouble to individual persons, in particular women. Perhaps philosophers have not always taken seriously the suffering of people.

Extreme Poverty and Genetically Modified Food

A suggestion has been made that we could reduce poverty and the number of unnecessary deaths by the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). This view has been supported for instance by the multinational agricultural biotechnology corporation The Monsanto. According to the argument, GM agriculture may (1) produce bigger harvests, (2) make food more nourishing, and (3) make food cheaper in the developing countries. There is no doubt that the problem of poverty should be resolved by political means, but it seems that at the moment there is no feasible political solution. The ethical acceptability of GM agriculture should be evaluated in this context. The defenders of GM agriculture argue that we should try to use *all* possible means to reduce the number of unnecessary deaths. However, there are well-known objections against this proposal (Altieri & Rosset, 2002). Let us list and consider four typical arguments against using GM agriculture in helping the poor.

The first argument is the claim that the major cause of poverty and hunger in the world is not lack of food but unfair distribution. The distribution of the means to acquire food and the actual distribution of what is already available in terms of food is poor. There is, therefore, no need to use GM agriculture. The first argument does not tell whether GM agriculture will be useful in the future. Even if there is enough food now, GM agriculture may be necessary in the future. It is also important to notice that the first objection does not prove that GM agriculture is useless: *if* GM agriculture results in bigger harvests or makes food more nourishing or cheaper, then it may be very helpful.

The second argument claims that gene-altered plants will induce allergies, or rock the delicate balance of nature. Gene-manipulated grain and other species are

living pollutants, the effects of which are beyond anyone's grasp to comprehend. Therefore, GM agriculture should not be used. This objection is based on the assumption that GM food has harmful effects on health or environment. Perhaps this is true, as the European Union stresses the risks of GM agriculture. However, the reasons behind the EU claims may be economic rather than environmental or social. The second objection raises the question whether it is more important to avoid health and environmental risks than to try to save people's lives: if GM agriculture saves five percent of people who would otherwise die, it would save a considerable number of people every day.

The third objection says that genetic engineering means that the poor in rural areas may well become more dependent on the multinational companies who provide seeds to local farmers. Local farmers will lose their own seeds. That is social injustice. Therefore, GM agriculture should be rejected. The third argument reveals one problem that is related to GM agriculture, although one should remember that *all* agriculture have similar consequences in poor countries, at least potentially. (The problem of dependence is related not only to GM agriculture.) A critic might point out that the third objection is based on the suspect ethical assumption that it is more important to oppose social injustice than try to save people's lives. Social injustice is a bad thing, but it need not *kill* anyone.

According to the fourth argument, even if gene technology were to yield bigger harvests, it would not help solve the hunger problem. The causes of underlying hunger are political and economic, they are not technical. Therefore, GM agriculture is futile. This objection shows that, at best, GM technology provides incomplete solutions to hunger and poverty: clean drinking water and cheaper medicines are, *inter alia*, also needed. However, the objection assumes wrongly that political problems cannot have technical solutions. Indeed, it is relatively common in politics that difficult questions are solved by technical means. (For example, new train connections make a change of work place more accessible and so on.) Another point is that the fourth argument is based on a dubious claim that nothing need be done if not everything can be accomplished. Of course, one must try to save one person even if it is impossible to save ten.

It is difficult to say how helpful GM technology in agriculture could be; the future may show that it is not very helpful, at least in eradicating poverty in terms of preventing unnecessary deaths.

Conclusion

Extreme poverty raises many ethical and philosophical questions, even if one agrees that poverty is a bad thing and should be eradicated. As the discussion above shows, many problems are related to the question what kinds of solutions are *feasible*. The notion of feasibility, however, is anything but clear. The evaluation of the feasibility of a certain goal seems to refer to means and processes. One can criticize a political proposal from the point of view of both desirability and feasibility, but quite often the desirability of a goal (such as reduction of poverty)

is taken *for granted* when its feasibility is evaluated. When we estimate the feasibility of the goal, we ask whether we should strive for the goal – now that we know it *is* desirable. There are at least two different attributions based on a lack of feasibility, i.e., judgments that conclude that a certain social ideal is "not realizable." First, it can be said that the realization of a social ideal is strictly and literally impossible and just cannot be implemented in practice. Second, it can be said that there are weak constraints such as economic or cultural facts that make an ideal less feasible than other goals in that their existence makes the achievement of the ideal very difficult and decreases the likelihood of success.

Notice, however, that it can also be said that a social ideal cannot be realized because its realization process would (more or less necessarily) require unjustified (moral) sacrifices. The point of these kinds of judgments is not to say that one cannot realize a given goal or that its realization would be very difficult. Rather, the point is to argue that one *should not* realize the goal, given the moral costs that its realization process would necessarily create. These kinds of judgments may require *moral defense*, but too often they are presented as if they were factual claims that need not be defended normatively. Those who make normative claims should make their reasoning explicit so that their arguments could be evaluated. People who present new proposals have a right to know exactly what are the allegedly unavoidable moral costs that make the ideals unrealizable. If someone argues that eradicating global poverty is unrealistic, then he or she has the burden of proof to show why this is so.

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