



# Kant and Global Poverty: Guest Editors' Introduction to Special Issue

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What duties do wealthy people have towards those living in poverty, in their own country or abroad? What duties do better-off people have towards those afflicted by life-threatening emergencies, such as starvation, epidemics and war?

For anyone living in relative comfort, these questions are familiar, if uncomfortable. Two familiar answers are rooted in our duties to help others where we can. The more comforting answer sees these duties as individual requirements of charity. They are optional aspects of virtue, weak or supererogatory. A more uncomfortable view sees them as stringent duties to aid or rescue.<sup>1</sup>

Kantian analyses of poverty agree that better-off people have duties to help others. But they also stress how limiting this focus can be. The moral concern of the better-off tends to figure poor people as needy recipients. A more adequate approach must recognise those living in poverty as agents and rights-holders. It must raise broader questions about the oppression and domination that exclude people from material resources. As Narayan (2000) puts it, poverty is also “powerlessness and voicelessness.”

Kant himself frames duties of beneficence as “imperfect.” This is not because they are weak or unimportant. Rather, they do not directly guide action, at least in most contexts. The content of these duties depends greatly on someone’s specific situation and the needs

<sup>1</sup> Singer (1972) and Unger (1996) offer the classic arguments here. Herman (1984, 2001) and Sticker (2019) offer Kantian approaches to international emergencies and the resulting duties.

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they can address. Their capacities to help depend on the means at their disposal – their relative wealth, of course, but also their power within political, economic and organisational structures.

Kant captures this fact in the organisation of his last great work, the *Metaphysics of Morals*.<sup>2</sup> This distinguishes the domains of *right* and *ethics*. Except in extreme conditions of civil breakdown, most people’s powers to act are structured by legal frameworks – the domain of right. Wealth and poverty exemplify this. Some people may have adequate or ample means, and may be able to help (some) others. Those living in poverty are excluded from others’ property, not just by walls and borders, but also by property rights and police forces.

In other words, a Kantian approach to poverty cannot begin with the ethical, imperfect duties of the better-off. It must be oriented by the legal and political frameworks which govern people’s access to vital resources and social institutions.

Kant’s own presentation may make this hard to see, and critics of inequality have often been sceptical of his approach. His account of right does not start with need or welfare. Instead, it is based on a formal account of external freedom: each person has the right to “independence from being compelled by another’s choice” (6:237). The *Metaphysics of Morals* offers lengthy justifications of rights to property and contract, but says little about the rights of the poor or about states’ duties to address poverty. It may seem, then, that a Kantian approach ultimately disappoints. His framework points to wider political issues behind familiar questions about duties to help. But in the end, it addresses poverty only in terms of “imperfect” duties. Those who benefit from existing systems of power and property must decide for themselves, how to weigh duties of beneficence against other commitments.

Such a conclusion would be mistaken. Onora O’Neill (e.g. 2016) and Thomas Pogge (e.g. 2002) have long argued that much poverty owes to unjust structures. Hence there are Kantian duties of justice to challenge and reform these structures. More recently, Arthur Ripstein (2009: Ch. 9) has pressed a further claim. Poverty exposes people to domination by others; domination is the opposite of freedom. States therefore have duties to ensure everyone’s material security. This duty does not reflect a benevolent concern for welfare, nor does it take a view about the fair distribution of resources. It arises because states’ existence and powers are justified in terms of people’s freedom: “independence from being compelled by another’s choice.”

A Kantian approach also insists that people living in poverty are agents and rights-holders. No one denies that emergency aid may be important: thus Peter Singer’s compelling example of the child who has fallen into a pond and risks drowning (1972). But widespread, on-going poverty is a different sort of emergency. Exploitative or exclusionary structures push people to the margins, leaving them without a secure place on this earth (Korsgaard 2018). Insofar as aid is an apt response to people’s plight, it must support those persons’ agency and autonomy, and avoid paternalism and self-congratulation. More broadly, unjust structures can only be changed *collectively* and on an *institutional level* (Allais 2015, Williams 2019).

The articles in this special issue range broadly across these themes – from duties of beneficence to the injustices of poverty to the challenges of overcoming it. Sensen stresses that duties of aid can be very demanding; depending on the context, “imperfect” does not

<sup>2</sup> Translated in Kant (1996); cited below using the standard *Akademie* pagination found in all modern editions.

mean “optional.” Sticker and Stohr both focus on the wrongs of indifference: we must not treat people as “mere things” (Sticker); we should be aware that widespread indifference has a self-perpetuating dynamic that fosters vice (Stohr). Problems of powerlessness and unfreedom are central to Pinzani’s article as well as Mieth & Williams’s. Injustice is central to Zylberman’s discussion, while empowerment forms the core theme of Mosayebi’s article. Ignieski stresses the need to become a partner to collective action in order to challenge injustice, while Blöser stresses the importance of hope in challenging poverty and the injustices that it reflects.

To introduce the articles in more detail, we group them as follows:

1. New interpretations of Kant’s Categorical Imperative (Sensen, Sticker, Mieth & Williams).
2. Political dimensions: states, rights and collective action (Pinzani, Mosayebi, Ignieski).
3. How virtue relates to social conditions and political efforts (Stohr, Blöser, Zylberman).

## 1 New interpretations of Kant’s Categorical Imperative

Kant offers three main formulations of his supreme moral principle, the Categorical Imperative. Sensen focuses on the formula of universal law; Sticker focuses on the formula of humanity; Mieth & Williams on the formula of the realm of ends.

Oliver Sensen argues against a familiar interpretation of the Formula of Universal Law: “act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (4:421). This is often taken to imply that duties of aid are imperfect and somehow optional. Against this, Sensen emphasises universal human ends such as self-preservation and developing one’s capacities. Universalisation requires us to promote and protect these ends. In Sensen’s view, mid-level principles enable this. These may be universal (e.g. “Do not murder”), or they may have cultural or conventional aspects (e.g. “Drive on the left”). These principles are morally obligatory insofar as they are necessary to protect universal human ends. Since self-preservation is such an end, some of these principles are bound to apply to situations where one person’s life is in great peril. Depending on the urgency of the situation, how costly aid would be to a potential helper, and whether others could also help, Sensen argues that duties to aid can be stringent indeed.

Martin Sticker focuses on the Formula of Humanity: “So act that you use humanity, in your own person as well as in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (4:429). He agrees with Sensen that some failures to rescue are wrong: they represent culpable indifference to our fellow human beings. However, the Formula of Humanity does not readily accommodate this. Indifference to someone is not treating as a means: it does not see them as even instrumentally valuable. Sticker therefore suggests that we reframe indifference as treating as a mere *thing* – a non-person who has neither intrinsic value (“end-in-themselves”) nor instrumental value (“(mere) means”). While many poor people suffer exploitation, others suffer from indifference, as do the victims of many emergencies. Sticker therefore contends that Kant’s formula should read: So act that you use humanity, in your own person as well as in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means, nor merely as a thing.

In an earlier chapter, Corinna Mieth and Garrath Williams (2022) argued that poverty represents a profound violation of human dignity. Decent civic and economic relations affirm people's dignity as ends-in-themselves. In such conditions, people are able to act *on their own terms* as means for others. This idea reflects Kant's third formula: "a systematic union of rational beings through common objective laws [whose] purpose is precisely the relation of these beings to one another, as ends *and means* – [this] can be called a realm of ends" (4:433, our emphasis). By contrast, poverty involves powerlessness and exclusion from such "union." People may be exploited (that is, used as *mere means*) or deprived of meaningful social roles (that is, treated as *useless*). In their contribution here, Mieth & Williams consider the poverty and powerlessness affecting so many contemporary migrants, and present these as forms of exclusion that violate Kant's realm of ends. Echoing Hannah Arendt's account of statelessness and "superfluosity" (1951), they stress how Western states so often prohibit contemporary migrants from *acting as means*. In some cases, migrants are subject to paternalistic policies that discount their own agency; in many more cases, they are subject to active exclusion and hostility, depriving them of material resources, civic agency, legal protection, and worthwhile opportunities to *act with and for others*.

## 2 Political dimensions

The next three contributions take explicitly political approaches, focussing on rights to freedom and agency, and duties to join in collective action.

Alessandro Pinzani approaches poverty in terms of states' duties to ensure the conditions of freedom, and more specifically in terms of proposals for a Universal Basic Income. The leading philosopher of UBI, Philippe Van Parijs, argues that paying an unconditional basic income to all citizens – regardless of their wealth or other income – secures "real freedom" (1995). Formal accounts of freedom, like Kant's, only provide for security and "self-ownership" (in the sense that no one else but I may control the use of my body). Van Parijs argues that this is not enough to support opportunities to develop and realise one's own plan of life. Pinzani rejects this characterisation. He argues that a UBI scheme may provide the best institutional realisation of Kant's formal ideal. UBI guarantees independence and avoids paternalism; it enables all citizens to participate in political life and to develop, as Kant puts it in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, their "moral perfection." In all these respects, it conforms to Kant's view of freedom: formal, but inextricably bound up with material factors.

Reza Mosayebi frames extreme poverty as a denial of agency, and juridical empowerment as the corresponding remedy. The ability to meaningfully assert one's human rights enables political agency and contributes to self-respect. When civic and economic conditions disempower people, others must insist on their juridical standing and support their abilities to assert their human rights. Juridical empowerment aims to raise the consciousness of the impoverished about the causes of their poverty, and to increase awareness of human rights and the need for structural and legal reforms. Mosayebi brings several Kantian elements to bear on the poverty debate: the duty to self to maintain one's self-respect, the prohibition on using oneself as a mere means, and the duty to maintain one's rightful honour – in Kant's words, to assert "one's worth as a human being in relation to others" (6:236). Mosayebi contrasts the idea of juridical empowerment with a beneficiary-oriented view of

poverty. The poor should not be viewed as passive recipients of aid or charity, but rather as juridical agents and rights-holders.

Violetta Igneski considers a related problem: which actors bear duties to affirm the agency and rights of those living in poverty? Even relatively wealthy people may find themselves powerless to address institutional and structural problems; only collective action can really address these. Drawing on contemporary discussions of joint and collective action, Igneski therefore focuses on the duties of unstructured collectives, and on individual duties to join together with others to challenge poverty. She also emphasises how Kant's own ideas support such an approach. While Kant's legal theory emphasises the state as a collective actor, his moral writings repeatedly point to other collective activities – sometimes in quite practical form (the “public use of reason,” the “visible” church), sometimes as ideals that should guide each person (as “citizens of the world,” contributors to an “ethical commonwealth,” or members of a “realm of ends”). Participation in these collective projects will mean very different things, depending on each person's situation and the forms of collective action in which they already participate. But to refuse such participation, in whatever forms may be possible, is to show indifference to profound injustice.

### 3 Social dimensions of vice and virtue

Three further contributions consider questions of vice and virtue, and show how they interact with social and political structures.

Karen Stohr suggests that we can better understand duties towards the poor if we focus on richer people's *indifference*. This is not only a failure of beneficence or justice: it is a vice. This vice is insidious. It does not merely incentivise acting wrongly. It also gives rise to self-deception and complacency: a person sees her activity as justified when it is not. Moreover, vice has social dimensions. When indifference is widespread, social conditions encourage or “normalise” it. The vice of indifference is particularly dangerous when it comes to “imperfect duties” that allow for latitude and judgment. Judgments and attitudes will tend to be skewed, giving too much weight to personal and even selfish ends. Framing indifference as a vice enriches Kant's picture of moral failure, and helps us to envisage remedies. For example, we should see significant sacrifices for others' ends as exemplary rather than exceptional or (merely) supererogatory. This claim presents a challenge for another aspect of Kant's ethics, however. While Kant sees secrecy as a virtue in practising beneficence, Stohr suggests that contributions and sacrifices must be public, in order to counter the normalisation of indifference.

Claudia Blöser investigates the role of hope, as people try to challenge and overcome poverty. Some development economists have argued that hope is essential to the agency and empowerment of people living in poverty. Programmes that try to aid and support the poor should enlist *their* hope “as a resource for sustaining agency in difficult circumstances.” Without disputing this point, Blöser points out that it tends to individualise the issues. Like all our authors, Blöser sees poverty as an institutional and political problem. Kant's approach emphasises the need for hope to be *rational*. Hope becomes self-deceiving and illusory if I over-estimate my individual chances of earning more money or escaping an unjust situation. In this sense, hopelessness may be entirely rational, especially if civic conditions are corrupt

or brutal. As such, efforts at change, and the hope involved in such efforts, must also address fundamental political structures.

Ariel Zylberman explores the nature of the wrong done to those living in poverty, and how Kant's philosophy of right interacts with ethics in this domain. While some deny that poverty violates individual rights, Zylberman argues that poverty is incompatible with a person's "original" or "innate" right to freedom (6:237). In Zylberman's terms, this means that the wrong of poverty is *relational*. This is not, he argues, just a matter of person-to-person forms of mistreatment. It is also a matter of structural relations that are unequal, humiliating and subordinating. Alongside his expansive view of the original right to freedom, this relational understanding leads to a radical reconceptualization of duties concerning poverty. Against authors who see private beneficence as an adequate response to poverty, Zylberman argues that this is bound to be morally hazardous. The rights of the poor must correlate with *duties of public right*; private beneficence cannot uphold rights. When states fail to discharge their duties concerning poverty, however, better-off individuals still have duties. These duties should be reconceptualized. They are not private beneficence, as implied by the familiar questions raised at the start of this introduction. Instead, they represent private remedies for public failures.

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