

Remedial Responsibility for Global Poverty:  
Individual Motivation and Institutional Capacity

Jesse Tomalty

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## ABSTRACT

### **Remedial Responsibility for Global Poverty: Individual Motivation and Institutional Capacity**

Jesse Tomalty

Tens of thousands of people worldwide die each day from poverty-related causes. More staggering than the statistics is the fact that these deaths, and the appalling living conditions surrounding them, are avoidable yet largely ignored. Not only have concrete strategies for poverty relief and sustainable development been suggested, but their implementation would require minimal sacrifice on the part of individuals in affluent nations. The normative implications of these facts are not, however, obvious. Do the “global rich” have responsibilities of assistance towards those suffering severe deprivation? I take for granted that the global rich have what David Miller refers to as “remedial responsibility” for global poverty. That is, they have a special responsibility to contribute to remedying the situations of the worst-off. A separate but related question has to do with how remedial responsibility is to be distributed. I argue that, although several factors can contribute to the assignment of remedial responsibility, an agent’s capacity to act in accordance with the requirements of remedial responsibility imposes a minimum constraint its assignment. With this in mind, I evaluate the claim that institutional agents should be treated as the primary bearers of remedial responsibility in the case of global poverty. I argue that because institutional agency depends on the motivation of individuals, the motivation of the individual constituents of an institutional agent constrain its capacity to act. In order to argue that institutional agents should be treated as the main bearers of remedial responsibility for global poverty, it must be the case that at least some of their individual constituents are sufficiently motivated to pursue the eradication of global poverty. The assignment of remedial responsibility for global poverty thus requires sensitivity to the constraints on the capacities of the potential bearers of that responsibility.

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# **Remedial Responsibility for Global Poverty: Individual Responsibility and Institutional Capacity**

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter I: Principles of Remedial Responsibility</b>	<b>7</b>
I.1) Principles for the Assignment of Remedial Responsibility	8
I.1.1) The Principles of Causal and Moral Responsibility	8
I.1.2) The Principle of Capacity	13
I.1.3) The Communitarian Principle	15
I.2) A Pluralistic Approach	17
I.3) The Method of Wide Reflective Equilibrium	19
I.4) Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Remedial Responsibility	22
I.5) Concluding Remarks	24
<b>Chapter II: Remedial Responsibility for Global Poverty</b>	<b>26</b>
II.1) Rawlsian Institutions and Institutional Agents	29
II.2) Institutional Responsibility	30
II.2.1) The Psychological Infeasibility Argument	31
II.2.2) The Institutional Efficiency Argument	35
II.2.2a) Collective Agency and Motivation	37
II.2.2b) Institutions as Mediators	42
II.3) Concluding Remarks	44
<b>Chapter III: Implications of Individual Motivation for                   Institutional Responsibility</b>	<b>46</b>
III.1) Interpretations of the Psychological Infeasibility Argument	47
III.2) Moral Psychology	49
III.3) The Feasibility of Institutional Responsibility	51
III.3.1) Failures to Form Judgments	52
III.3.2) Failures to Form Motivation	55
III.3.3) Competing Motives	56
III.4) Does the Psychological Infeasibility Argument Support Institutional Responsibility?	59
III.4.1) The Motivational Efficaciousness of Institutional Responsibility	59
III.4.2) Context-Dependence and the Dynamic Nature of Feasibility	61
III.5) Concluding Remarks	63
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>69</b>

## Introduction

The World Bank estimates that over 1 billion people, nearly one-fifth of the world's population live below its one-dollar-a-day poverty line. Around 2.6 billion people - half the world - live on less than two dollars a day.<sup>1</sup> While the extent of severe poverty according to the World Bank is decreasing, the details concerning the precise numbers are controversial.<sup>2</sup> But even the most generous figures are staggering. The fact remains that extreme poverty is pervasive in many parts of the world. Not only are people poor relative to others, but many are poor in absolute terms, lacking the most basic necessities for survival including a complete diet, clean water, and access to health care.

For the most part, we have the knowledge and resources necessary to remedy the situations of the worst-off people in the world. Development specialists are advancing increasingly nuanced strategies with sensitivity to the particular circumstances in each country and region. Although there is not always consensus on how to best address poverty, there is a great deal of convergence on some points. The United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), for example, provide a widely accepted strategy for halving global poverty by 2015.<sup>3</sup>

Proposed solutions to global poverty, most notably the MDGs, involve a relatively small cost to the global rich. The 0.7 per cent of their Gross National Product

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<sup>1</sup> These figures were originally measured in 1985 international prices and adjusted based on purchasing power parities (PPPs). When re-calculated based on 1993 consumption PPP estimates, they actually reflect the number of people living on less than \$1.08 a day and \$2.15 a day. World Bank, "World Development Indicators table 2.7"; available from

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/DATASTATISTICS>; accessed 2 April 2007.

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas Pogge and Sanjay G. Reddy (2004) who accuse the World Bank of applying flawed methodology when calculating its poverty estimates. They conclude that the World Bank understates the extent of extreme poverty and that its claim that poverty is sharply decreasing is unjustified.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations, "Millennium Development Goals"; available at [www.un.org/millenniumgoals](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals); accessed 2 April 2007.

(GNP) required by the MDGs, for example, is not only small relative to the benefits it would provide the global poor, but is also small compared to other expenditures of affluent nations such as military expenses.<sup>4</sup> Despite the general endorsement of strategies for the eventual eradication of global poverty, the global rich are systematically failing to do all that they can to insure the success of such strategies. With few exceptions, affluent nations repeatedly fail to reach their targets for official development assistance, and often fall below half the amount promised.<sup>5</sup> This has resulted in aid efforts falling billions of dollars short of what they require to be effective and sustainable.

The normative implications of these premises are highly debated in contemporary moral and political philosophy. Is there a universal human right to basic subsistence? If so, on whom does it impose a corresponding duty? Are duties of assistance duties of justice, or are they weaker duties of beneficence? Are they positive or negative? Are they special or general? Are they perfect or imperfect? In what follows, I will take for granted that there is a universal right to basic subsistence. This assumption can, however, be challenged in several ways: One could, for example, object that poverty-related deaths thin out a population that the planet cannot support. I will not spend much time refuting this neo-Malthusian point because it has been sufficiently overturned by theorists who point to, for example, the fact that, if used properly, Earth's resources are sufficient for everyone,<sup>6</sup> not to mention the well-documented correlation between

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<sup>4</sup> According to Global Issues, "Less than one per cent of what the world spent every year on weapons was needed to put every child into school by the year 2000 and yet it didn't happen." Available from <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Facts.asp#fact4>; accessed on 31 March 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Global Issues, "US and Foreign Aid Assistance"; available at <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Debt/USAid.asp#Almostallrichnationssfailthisobligation>; accessed 31 March 2007.

<sup>6</sup> See Kai Nielsen (2003), 247-248.

increased wealth and decreased population size.<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, one could agree that global poverty is a truly unfortunate situation, but argue that those who are deprived have no claim on anyone to assist them. One might deny the existence of a universal right to basic subsistence, or even the existence of universal human rights altogether. On these views, assisting the destitute is a supererogatory act of charity; nothing is morally required. I will not take up either of these arguments here; rather, I will take for granted that global poverty is a situation in dire need of remedy because the rights of those suffering are being violated.<sup>8</sup> This means that there must be corresponding duty-bearers. I will not discuss the details of the specific nature of the duty of assistance; rather, I will pose the question as one of general responsibility for global poverty relief. Specifically, this project will focus on the question of which kinds of agents hold responsibility for global poverty relief.

The concept of responsibility has multiple applications and thus requires some elucidation. The claim that the global rich have responsibilities *to the global poor* indicates that we are not merely interested in explaining how the situation came about, or on laying blame; rather we are interested in assigning normative responsibility and, in particular, remedial responsibility. Following David Miller (2005a), I take it that “[t]o be remedially responsible for a bad situation means to have a special obligation to put the bad situation right” (96). To have remedial responsibility for global poverty is to have a duty to assist those who suffer from severe deprivations. In order to assign remedial responsibility for global poverty, we must find a general principle for the assignment of such responsibility. This will be the aim of the first chapter. I will argue that because the

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<sup>7</sup> See Amartya Sen, (1999) 216-219.

<sup>8</sup> For a compelling argument in support of the universal human right to basic subsistence, see Henry Shue (1996).



assignment of responsibility for global poverty relief is part of any strategy for the eradication of poverty, the assignment of remedial responsibility must be done in a way that can feasibly be fulfilled. This requires that the agents assigned remedial responsibility have the capacity to fulfill it.

In the second chapter I will evaluate the claim that remedial responsibility for global poverty should be assigned to institutional agents. I will discuss two prominent arguments in favour of this view: One is that the assignment of remedial responsibility for large-scale global crises including extreme poverty to individuals is infeasible; the other is that institutional agents can more efficiently handle the demands of discharging remedial responsibility for global poverty. I will argue that neither adequately demonstrates the feasibility of assigning remedial responsibility to institutions because neither fully addresses the capacity of institutional agents to act. Institutional agency depends on the motivation of individuals to act in pursuit of some end. Therefore, the motivation of the individual constituents of an institutional agent constrains its capacity to act. In order to argue that institutional agents should be treated as the main bearers of remedial responsibility for global poverty, it must be the case that at least some of their individual constituents are sufficiently motivated to pursue the eradication of global poverty.

In the final chapter, I will elaborate on this last point. I will critically examine the argument that the assignment of remedial responsibility to individuals is infeasible. A consideration of the reasons that allegedly make the assignment of remedial responsibility to individuals infeasible suggests that these reasons may also contribute to the infeasibility of assigning remedial responsibility to institutional agents. I will

conclude that although institutional agents are often more efficient than individuals when it comes to dealing with global poverty and other large-scale crises, the assignment of remedial responsibility on this basis requires that the feasibility of doing so be shown. Where individuals are not sufficiently motivated to create, reform, and support institutional agents directed towards the eradication of global poverty, such institutional agents cannot reasonably be assigned remedial responsibility. The assignment of remedial responsibility for global poverty thus requires sensitivity to the constraints on the capacities of the potential bearers of that responsibility.

Severe poverty is a pressing issue. Around one-third of human deaths annually are caused by insufficient nutrition, lack of safe drinking water, and lack of access to basic health care. Thomas Pogge (2005a) puts the figures disturbingly into perspective in the following paragraph:

Each day, some 50,000 human beings – mostly children, mostly female, and mostly people of colour – die from starvation, diarrhoea, pneumonia, tuberculosis, malaria, measles, perinatal conditions and other poverty-related causes. This continuous global death toll matches that of the December 2004 tsunami every few days, and it matches, every three years, the entire death toll of the Second World War, concentration camps and gulags included. (722)

Every day we are witness to the preventable deaths of a sickening number of innocent people. Most stand idly by; many, I suspect, simply because they do not know what to do. The end of global poverty is a thoroughly multi-disciplinary endeavour: Economists, political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, engineers, and medical researchers are among the many specialists needed for constructing effective strategies for development.

These strategies should focus not only on what will most effectively address the causes of poverty in developing nations, but also on what those in affluent nations can do to abet economic progress in these regions.

No less important is the contribution of philosophy: Working with empirical data concerning which measures are most likely to be effective, it is the task of philosophers to provide an analysis of the associated normative requirements. This involves establishing which agents bear remedial responsibility. This is necessary both for the purpose of institutional design as well as for the specification individual moral requirements. As we will see, the requirements imposed on individuals will vary depending on the presence or absence of institutional agents suited to discharge remedial responsibilities for global poverty. As such, the assignment of remedial responsibility to the appropriate agents is essential to providing a substantive account of the responsibilities of individuals.

## Chapter I: Principles of Remedial Responsibility

An important question in applied moral philosophy has to do with the grounds for the assignment of remedial responsibility. When is an agent responsible to put a bad situation right? Miller (2005a) considers four principles for the assignment of remedial responsibility, each of which will be discussed in this chapter:

- (1) *The Principle of Causal Responsibility*: Remedial responsibility is to be assigned only on the basis of an agent's causal responsibility for a bad situation.
- (2) *The Principle of Moral Responsibility*: Remedial responsibility is to be assigned only on the basis of an agent's moral responsibility for a bad situation.
- (3) *The Principle of Capacity*: Remedial responsibility is to be assigned only according to the capacity of agents to discharge it.
- (4) *The Communitarian Principle*: Remedial responsibility is to be assigned only on the basis of social ties.

Miller concludes that assigning remedial responsibility on the basis of any one of these alone is problematic and that we therefore ought to adopt a pluralistic approach. In this chapter, I will expand on Miller's arguments by discussing some approaches to the assignment of remedial responsibility for global poverty that rely exclusively on one of the monistic principles he considers. As we will see, a general reliance on any given monistic principle will fail to consistently yield acceptable judgments about the bearers of remedial responsibility. According to Miller, only a pluralistic principle can accommodate these widely held judgments. Though I will argue in favour of a pluralistic principle for the assignment of remedial responsibility, Miller provides only partial support for such a principle by neglecting to provide a compelling justificatory

framework for his theory. This is because he offers no reason to think that assignments of remedial responsibility that conflict with our widely held judgments are problematic. I will argue that Miller's appeal to widely held judgments about the assignment of remedial responsibility can be justified by applying Rawls's method of wide reflective equilibrium.

## **I.1) Principles for the Assignment of Remedial Responsibility**

### ***I.1.1) The Principles of Causal and Moral Responsibility***

Causal responsibility entails an agent's having played a causal role in the occurrence of a state of affairs. Relying on the commonsense notion of causation, to say that an agent caused a state of affairs is to single her out from among the multitude of conditions surrounding the occurrence of the state of affairs as being responsible for its coming about.<sup>9</sup> Though causal responsibility may have normative implications, they are always external to the mere fact of causation. Compare someone who stomps on another person's foot by accident to someone who does so intentionally: Each is causally responsible for the pain experienced by the respective victim, though there seems to be grounds for blame in the second case, but not so obviously in the first. Regardless of the blameworthiness of the agent's action, it seems as if the clumsy agent still owes the "victim" an apology. Miller suggests that there is something intuitively right about the assignment of remedial responsibility on the basis of an agent's causal responsibility. Even if the agent did not intend or foresee the consequences of his actions, there are cases in which we still want to hold him responsible for them.

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<sup>9</sup> See H. L. A. Hart and A. M. Honoré, *Causation and the Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), chapter 2.

An agent who is causally responsible for a bad situation may or may not, in addition, hold moral responsibility. Moral responsibility involves blaming or praising an agent for her involvement in a state of affairs coming about. It is important to note that causal responsibility comes apart from moral responsibility, though they are often entangled. One may want to say that in the toe-stomping example above, the agent who accidentally stomped on the person's foot should have been paying closer attention to where she was stomping and is thus worthy of blame for having caused the victim harm. Surely neglect, at least in this case, is less morally reprehensible than malevolence; but we still may expect the clumsy agent to apologize (where apology is taken as a remedial action) for having caused pain. An example of bare causal responsibility is an agent who kicks his partner in his sleep. Notwithstanding psychoanalytic speculations about the inadvertent expression of unconscious motives, it would be hard to make the case for the moral responsibility of this agent for whatever pain and sleeplessness he caused. There are equally good examples of attributions of moral responsibility independent of the agent having caused the state of affairs. Such cases usually take the form of omissions. If I agree to feed my neighbour's cat while she is away on vacation and I fail to do so, while I did not cause the cat to die in any direct sense (say, by smothering it with a pillow), I can surely be held morally responsible for its death.

Establishing which agents are causally and morally responsible for global poverty poses a considerable challenge. The task is complicated by many factors including the pervasiveness of extreme poverty, increasing globalization, the complexity of both domestic and international politics, and the historical roots of the problem. Pogge (2002, 2005) has made appreciable ground in establishing the causal and moral responsibility of

the global rich for global poverty; but he has still succeeded in making only general claims that say little about which *specific* agents from among the global rich hold this responsibility. Given the complexity of the situation, I am sceptical that the kind of specificity required by the principles of causal and moral responsibility is possible. This alone gives reason to doubt the appropriateness of appealing to these principles in assigning remedial responsibility for global poverty;<sup>10</sup> but even if it were possible to identify, with some degree of certainty, those who are causally or morally responsible for the massive deprivations suffered by millions of people worldwide, the principles of causal and moral responsibility nonetheless fail to ground the assignment of remedial responsibility. This is because they provide neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for remedial responsibility.

The necessity of causal and moral responsibility for remedial responsibility is challenged by situations in which the agent is either not causally responsible or not morally responsible for a bad situation but still holds remedial responsibility for it. The necessity of causal responsibility is therefore challenged by situations in which the agent can be assigned remedial responsibility on the basis of moral responsibility in the absence of causal responsibility. This is exemplified by the cat-sitting example above. In this case, I should be held remedially responsible for the death of my friend's cat on the basis of my moral responsibility for the situation, despite having not directly caused the cat's death. The principle of moral responsibility faces a similar challenge in situations in

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<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Ashford (forthcoming) draws attention to the inadequacy of the common-sense paradigm conception of a human rights violation according to which "a particular agent intentionally inflicts a serious harm on a particular victim" (9). Excluding cases in which the distribution of responsibility for a bad situation does not conform to this conception can make the claims of the badly-off appear to lack corresponding duty-bearers. Establishing the "perpetrators" in the case of global poverty certainly faces this challenge.

which causal responsibility grounds the assignment of remedial responsibility in the absence of moral responsibility. Consider the abovementioned example of the agent who kicks his partner in his sleep. While we cannot attribute moral responsibility to this agent, we may expect him to apologize for having harmed his partner, and we might even expect him to make efforts to change his behaviour (perhaps by seeking advice from a sleep specialist).

Furthermore, there are situations in which no agent can be identified as being either causally or morally responsible for a bad situation. When natural disaster strikes, for example, surely those affected have a claim to some assistance. Indeed, a great deal of poverty can be attributed to environmental and geographical factors. In such situations, regardless of how much people may be suffering, according to the principles of causal and moral responsibility, no one holds remedial responsibility. This view is commonly espoused by libertarians. They hold that morality is confined to a principle of non-maleficence: The only constraint on moral action is that agents may not arbitrarily harm others. Acts of charitable assistance towards those one has not harmed may be encouraged, but such acts are supererogatory. The problem with this approach is that charitable assistance often falls short of what is needed to remedy a situation. Since no one has remedial responsibility, when assistance is inadequate, on the libertarian account, no one can justifiably be coerced into contributing more. Because there are situations that urgently require remedy even though particular agents cannot be identified as being either causally or morally responsible, we can conclude that neither causal nor moral responsibility are necessary for remedial responsibility.



The failure of causal and moral responsibility to provide sufficient conditions for remedial responsibility is apparent in cases in which an agent is either causally or morally responsible for a bad situation, but should not thereby be held remedially responsible for it. The insufficiency of causal responsibility can be shown by cases in which an agent is causally responsible for harm done to another, but that the harm is justifiable. Miller (2005a) gives the example of a shopkeeper who drives his competition out of business (100). While he has indeed caused a bad situation for the out-of-business shopkeeper, in a free market, he cannot be said to owe him anything. In this case, causal responsibility comes apart from remedial responsibility. In order to show that an agent is remedially responsible for the bad situation, further justification is required. One may, at this juncture, wish to appeal to the agent's moral responsibility. The shopkeeper may be morally criticized for negligence of his competition's well-being. When harm caused is justifiable within a given framework, the moral justifiability of the framework itself remains to be questioned. However, even if there are cases in which agents can be held morally responsible for failing to question the framework that allegedly justifies the harm they caused, moral responsibility is itself insufficient for remedial responsibility.

Both causal and moral responsibility fail to provide sufficient conditions for the assignment of remedial responsibility because neither takes into account the capacity of the responsible agent to remedy the bad situation. In looking exclusively to the past, neither is able to adequately address the question of who is best situated to put the bad situation right. As the familiar Kantian axiom states, "ought" implies "can". Therefore, an agent's causal or moral responsibility for a bad situation needs to be supplemented

with his capacity to remedy it in order to provide a full justification for the assignment of remedial responsibility to him.

### *1.1.2) The Principle of Capacity*

Miller's principle of capacity encompasses both effectiveness and cost.<sup>11</sup>

Utilitarian approaches to the assignment of remedial responsibility rely predominantly on this principle. This view is exemplified by Singer (1972) who argues that "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it" (231). This is a straightforward application of the principle of capacity.

Miller highlights two reasons that the principle of capacity is insufficient for assigning remedial responsibility. The first has to do with the possibility that the most effective means of remedying a situation could impose unduly high costs on the agent assigned remedial responsibility on the sole basis of capacity. Whereas cost to the agent is of no concern in the case of moral responsibility, if we rely on the principle of capacity, according to Miller (2005a), "we have to begin by weighing effectiveness against cost to determine whose capacity is greatest in the morally relevant sense" (203). If a person is drowning and the strongest swimmer happens also to be the most fearful, then the cost of having him rescue the imperilled swimmer may be very high. Taking effectiveness and cost together, it may turn out that the best swimmer is not in fact the most capable and therefore does not bear remedial responsibility. In the case of global poverty relief, this yields the bizarre result that if a wealthy stock broker is very attached

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<sup>11</sup> Miller (2005a) points out that cost to the agent has to be factored in at some point. If it is not calculated as part of an agent's capacity, he argues that a separate principle of least cost would be necessary in assigning remedial responsibility. The principle of capacity for Miller therefore encompasses an objective cost-benefit analysis along the lines of the utilitarian calculus (114, *nm.* 14).

to her holdings, then she may end up having less capacity to donate to poverty relief than a less wealthy waiter who is less attached to his holdings. Of course the utilitarian would have to argue that if the grief caused to the stock broker truly did outweigh the waiter's burden, and that, taking this into account along with the benefit to the many poor people that could be helped, if the overall utility were not improved, then it is indeed the case that the waiter bears greater remedial responsibility. But surely such situations are highly unlikely, if not downright impossible. Of course, the Singerian account acknowledges that any given person must not give up so much of their income that their health, their job, or any other aspect of their lives essential to generating income is put at risk. But this is in line with maximizing the overall benefit, particularly over the long term.

The other problem with assigning remedial responsibility on the basis of capacity alone is what Miller refers to as the grasshopper and ant objection (2005a, 103). While the ant toiled all summer to store food for the winter, the grasshopper lazed about enjoying the warm weather. So why, when the grasshopper comes pleading to the ant at the first sign of cold, should the ant share with him his surplus? Contrary to the principles of causal and moral responsibility, the principle of capacity is entirely forward-looking. The historical acontextualism of the principle of capacity makes it vulnerable to the charge of unfairly assigning remedial responsibility and thus punishing those who had nothing to do with the bad situation coming about. But again, this hardly applies to the case of global poverty. The claim that those living in extreme poverty are simply lazy reveals gross ignorance of the environmental, biological, socio-political, and cultural forces that contribute to the situation.

Though the reasons that Miller discusses for rejecting the principle of capacity have little application in the case of global poverty relief, they work to constrain the assignment of remedial responsibility in other situations. Capacity is sufficient for remedial responsibility in some cases, but not in all. The gravity of the situation, the relative cost to the agent with the capacity to help, and the extent of the badly-off agent's responsibility for her own situation must all be taken into account. But, as the adage "ought" implies "can" asserts, an agent's capacity to remedy a bad situation is a necessary condition for the assignment of remedial responsibility to that agent. I will return to this point later.

### ***1.1.3) The Communitarian Principle***

The fourth and final principle that Miller considers for the allocation of remedial responsibility is that of community. The communitarian principle says that when people are linked together by various sorts of social ties (e.g. family, friends, teams, nations), "they also (justifiably) see themselves as having special responsibilities to one another, responsibilities that are greater than those they have to humanity at large" (2005a, 104). Communitarian approaches to responsibility come in several varieties: Some focus on nationality, arguing that responsibility does not extend to non-compatriots. Others focus on relationships by claiming that responsibility increases as a function of social proximity; as such, my responsibilities to myself are the strongest followed by those towards my family, close friends, acquaintances, compatriots, and fellow human beings respectively.<sup>12</sup> Many find this approach highly intuitive and, indeed, it does reflect the

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<sup>12</sup> Of course this is only a rough outline of the various groups within one's circle of moral concern. The actual picture would be much more nuanced and probably different for each person. For example, if I am particularly close to my extended family, I may have more moral concern for them than I do for my close friends; but if I have been alienated from my family, moral concern for my friends may take precedence.

way in which most people tend to view their own responsibilities. The communitarian principle, however, is not necessary for remedial responsibility because there are cases in which remedial responsibility exists in the absence of special relationships. For example, if I violate the rights of a complete stranger, despite the lack of any special relationship, surely I become remedially responsible towards him. Elsewhere Miller (2005b) argues that shared nationality can ground special duties towards compatriots; but this does not preclude the existence of responsibilities towards non-compatriots.

The communitarian principle is not sufficient for remedial responsibility because, like the principles of causal and moral responsibility, it fails to take into account capacity. If a person in need belongs to a community in which no one can assist him, and if remedial responsibility is assigned based only on the communitarian principle, then that person will not be assisted. In the case of global poverty, it is frequently the case that even the best-off members of a poor community are not able to assist those suffering from severe deprivation without seriously compromising their own well-being. In such cases, there is little independent moral justification for the allocation of remedial responsibility solely on the basis of communal ties. Sometimes there are pragmatic reasons to assign remedial responsibility on the basis of proximity, but when those who are closest cannot help, some cases still demand the assignment of remedial responsibility to those outside of the community.

Finally, the communitarian principle alone is insufficient for the assignment of remedial responsibility because it tells us nothing of how remedial responsibility ought to be assigned within a community. The extent to which a given agent is remedially responsible can be explained by the extent of their causal or moral responsibility, or by

the extent of their capacity, but if someone is in need within a community, without reference to one of these principles, it is not clear how remedial responsibility is to be distributed among its members. A further principle is therefore required to ground the assignment of remedial responsibility within the community.

## **I.2) A Pluralistic Approach**

Miller points out that, although none of these principles is sufficient for remedial responsibility in every case, there is nevertheless something about each that entails some sort of special responsibility on the part of the agent. It is for this reason that he advances a pluralistic approach to the assignment of remedial responsibility that he calls the *connection theory* (2005a, 110-113). According to the connection theory, the principles of causal responsibility, moral responsibility, capacity, and community are ordered based on the strength of the type of connection between agents in a given situation. Each of the principles that Miller considers represents a way in which agents can be connected. But since several types of connection can characterize a single relationship, the connection theory instructs us to look to the strongest type of connection in each case for assigning remedial responsibility. To illustrate, consider the aforementioned toe-stomping example. The strongest connection between the clumsy agent and her victim is causal: Since the clumsy agent neither intended nor foresaw her harmful action, moral responsibility is not obvious; capacity to help is irrelevant since there is little anyone can do for a sore toe besides apologize (which, presumably, is not beyond most peoples' capacity); and the clumsy agent and her victim may share only very weak communal ties, or even none at all. Connection theory therefore instructs us to assign remedial

responsibility in this case based on the clumsy agent's causal responsibility for the pain suffered by her victim. In other situations, other connections may be stronger. In these cases, connection theory says that we are to assign remedial responsibility according to the strongest connection.

A pluralistic approach to the assignment of remedial responsibility seems to be the only way to accommodate all of the factors that may be relevant to a given situation. We have seen that none of the principles so far considered can, by itself, account for remedial responsibility in every case, therefore either there is some other monistic principle that can invariably produce acceptable assignments of remedial responsibility, or no monistic principle can do the job and a pluralistic approach is in order. No monistic principle appears to conform to the former; therefore, the assignment of remedial responsibility based on a pluralistic principle is more plausible. This is not to say that no monistic principle exists upon which all cases of remedial responsibility can be assigned, only that none comes to mind upon reflection.

Although a pluralistic principle for the assignment of remedial responsibility is appropriate, it is not clear that Miller's connection theory is the best one. Miller supports his argument for the connection theory by pointing out that only it yields assignments of remedial responsibility that conform to our widely held judgments; but he is not explicit about why this congruity is so important. In what follows, I will argue that Rawls's method of wide reflective equilibrium provides justification for a pluralistic principle of remedial responsibility. After outlining the method of wide reflective equilibrium, I will contrast it with some alternative approaches in order to make the case for its superiority. I will then discuss how it supports a pluralistic principle for the assignment of remedial

responsibility. Though the method of wide reflective equilibrium supports a pluralistic principle, I will argue that it does not necessarily support the connection theory as Miller advances it.

### **I.3) The Method of Wide Reflective Equilibrium**

Adapted by Rawls from Goodman's method of justification, reflective equilibrium as applied to moral theory, involves the process of going back and forth between our considered moral judgments and accepted moral principles in search of a point of balance between them. According to Rawls (1999), our considered judgments are those that we reach upon reflection in "conditions favourable to the exercise of the sense of justice" (42). This is not to say that they are necessarily true or that we are necessarily justified in making these judgements. Identifying our most strongly held considered moral judgments is the first step in establishing a complete moral theory. Once we have eliminated those moral judgments about which we are less confident, we consider whether the remaining judgments are "strong enough to yield a significant set of principles" (Rawls 1999, 18). If not, we look for further judgments that do yield moral principles. When we come across a conflict between a considered judgment and a moral principle, we can either reject the judgment or modify the principle accordingly. This process continues until equilibrium is reached. Of course, the equilibrium need not be final since new judgments or principles not previously considered may come to light and upset the balance. The process is therefore continuous, pausing at the occasional point of equilibrium, and resuming when new inconsistencies are detected.



What I have just described is the method of “narrow” reflective equilibrium. By contrast, the method of “wide” reflective equilibrium requires that, in addition to our considered judgments and moral principles, we take into account a variety of background theories. These may include social, economic, political, and psychological theories, theories about the role of morality, and theories about procedural justice. Just as in narrow reflective equilibrium, to achieve wide reflective equilibrium, one must go back and forth between considered moral judgments, moral principles, and, now, relevant background theories, checking for inconsistencies and, when they arise, by rejecting or revising judgments, principles, or background theories as needed. The role of the background theories is to show that the moral principles are more acceptable than alternative principles on grounds relatively independent from their consistency with considered moral judgments.<sup>13</sup>

The method of wide reflective equilibrium is without foundations. Foundationalist approaches to justification in ethics give epistemic priority to moral judgements, moral principles, or background theories. Intuitionism prioritizes moral judgements or intuitions; a priori moral principles are foundational for theories including utilitarianism and deontology; and naturalistic approaches give epistemic priority to non-moral background theories. The method of wide reflective equilibrium is distinguishable from these theories because no type of consideration is given epistemic priority over the others. While judgments and principles are taken into account, neither provides an absolute court of appeal. And whereas naturalism reduces morality to non-moral features, wide reflective equilibrium takes these into account as background theories, but attempts no such reduction. According to the method of wide reflective equilibrium, the

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<sup>13</sup> See Norman Daniels (1996), 21-22.

acceptability of the background theories may itself depend on some aspects of our considered moral judgments and our moral principles. Likewise, the acceptability of judgments and principles is constrained by the background theories.

Critics of reflective equilibrium have argued that, despite masquerading as an anti-foundationalist method, it is functionally indistinguishable from a sophisticated version of intuitionism.<sup>14</sup> On this account, considered moral judgements, which are essentially intuitions, provide a relatively fixed standard against which moral principles are tested. After the process of going back and forth until an equilibrium is reached, what we are left with is a person's moral opinion – considered, but still just an opinion. But *wide* reflective equilibrium escapes this objection because it allows for extensive revision of moral judgments, not just on the basis of moral principles, but also on the basis of the relevant background theories.<sup>15</sup>

The advantage of shedding foundations in moral theory in favour of wide reflective equilibrium is that it makes theory acceptance in ethics more tractable. Foundationalist theories cannot provide independent reasons for the assignment of epistemic priority to any given consideration. Any such reasons would, in effect, weaken the foundation of the theory. For example, a utilitarian may argue that the principle of utility is foundational because respecting it yields the best overall results. But this reason is not independent of the principle of utility itself. An independent reason may be that maximizing utility is intuitively appealing; but this would be to admit considered moral

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Singer (1974), 494.

<sup>15</sup> See Daniels (1996) "In seeking wide reflective equilibrium, we are constantly making plausibility judgments about which of our considered moral judgments we should revise in light of theoretical considerations *at all levels*" (28).

judgments into the justification of utilitarianism. By shedding foundations, reflective equilibrium allows for theory acceptance on the basis of independent reasons.

#### **I.4) Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Remedial Responsibility**

As we have seen, exclusive reliance on one of the monistic principles for the assignment of remedial responsibility yields results that conflict with widely accepted judgments about responsibility. Focusing only on backward-looking principles, namely the principles of causal and moral responsibility, can yield the unacceptable assignment of remedial responsibility to agents who are either incapable or not ideally placed to act. Focusing only on capacity can yield the unacceptable assignment of remedial responsibility to agents who are unfairly required to compensate for the laziness of others, or for whom compliance has an extremely high cost. Finally, reliance on the principle of community alone conflicts with intuitive judgments about remedial responsibility towards those outside the community.

Having tested monistic principles for the assignment of remedial responsibility against these widely accepted judgments, we can now see that a pluralistic principle for the assignment of remedial responsibility is more conducive to the attainment of a reflective equilibrium. We have seen that none of the monistic principles supports the assignment of remedial responsibility in every situation. Therefore, barring the possibility of having overlooked a monistic principle, we must conclude that a pluralistic principle should be used. One could object that, given the conflict between each of the monistic principles and widely accepted considered judgments, rather than adjusting the principles as I have suggested, it is the judgments that should be altered. But what I have

provided so far is only a weak defence of the pluralistic principle because it only describes a balance in narrow reflective equilibrium. Taking into account relevant background theories about the purpose of the assignment of remedial responsibility provides further justification for amending the principles in this case, rather than our judgments.

In order for the pluralistic principle to hold in wide reflective equilibrium, it must be consistent with the relevant background theories. The reason that reliance on one of the monistic principles is not supported in wide reflective equilibrium is because it fails to respect the role of remedial responsibility in moral and political theory. Remedial responsibility is distinct from other types of responsibility because it is not merely descriptive: Those interested in assigning remedial responsibility have an interest in seeing to it that the given situation actually gets remedied. The assignment of remedial responsibility is part of any complete strategy for putting a bad situation right. In the case of global poverty, assigning remedial responsibility is part of a comprehensive strategy for the eradication of poverty. As such, the criteria for the assignment of remedial responsibility will reflect the criteria for a good strategy. Any good strategy is one that is likely to be effective; therefore, a fundamental criterion for the assignment of remedial responsibility is that it is effective. In order for a strategy for the eradication of global poverty to be effective, it must at least be feasible.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Note that my claim here is not that all feasible strategies will be effective, but rather that all effective strategies are feasible. I take it that the effectiveness of a strategy can be measured in degrees (namely how closely the actual outcome approximates the intended outcome), whereas a strategy is either feasible or infeasible. To say a strategy is partially feasible is just to say that only some of the components of that strategy are feasible. The strategy as a whole, however, would be infeasible. There is some debate over what feasibility entails, but I will return to this in chapter III.

In section I.1, we saw that the assignment of remedial responsibility to an agent requires neither the causal responsibility nor the moral responsibility of the agent. We also saw that the remedially responsible agent need not share communitarian ties with the agent owed assistance. I argued that the only consideration that is necessary for an agent to hold remedial responsibility is the agent's capacity to remedy the situation. In light of our discussion of wide reflective equilibrium, we can now see why this is the case: An assignment of remedial responsibility to an agent who lacks the capacity to fulfill it will yield an infeasible and thus ineffective strategy. The relevant background theory of the role of remedial responsibility confines the assignment of remedial responsibility to those agents with the capacity to fulfill it.

#### **I.5) Concluding Remarks**

Miller's connection theory does not weight the various considerations that determine the assignment of remedial responsibility. He argues that the application of the considerations in a pre-determined sequential order will fail because no order will invariably yield acceptable results. But without giving more substance to the concept of "the strongest connection," the application of Miller's connection theory creates ambiguities. Given the necessity of capacity for remedial responsibility, I propose an amended version of the connection theory that first asks whether the agent would have the capacity to fulfill their remedial responsibility should it be assigned to them. If the answer is negative, then there is no point in proceeding to further considerations since that agent is necessarily precluded from being assigned remedial responsibility. Once the agents with the capacity to remedy a bad situation have been identified, something like

the connection theory may be used in order to establish which agents from among those with the capacity to help are in fact remedially responsible. For example, if two agents, *A* and *B*, both have equal capacity to remedy the bad situation of a third agent, *C*; but *A* had nothing to do with *C*'s situation, while *B* is causally responsible for it, then there is reason to assign remedial responsibility exclusively to *B*.

I have said nothing yet about how the concept of capacity should be understood. I take it as uncontroversial that an agent's capacity to perform a given action involves at least the logical and physical possibility of being able to perform it. But even the claim that an agent has the physical capacity to remedy a bad situation is not unambiguous. It is not obvious how and to what extent psychological constraints, for example, should count as constraints on an agent's capacity to act. I will return to this question in the second chapter (II.2.2a). The broad characterization of capacity as the absence of any constraints on an agent's action that fall outside that agent's control would need to be fleshed out for a complete account of the assignment of remedial responsibility; however, it will suffice for the discussion to follow. I will turn presently to the question of whether institutional agents can be held remedially responsible for global poverty. In order for this assignment of remedial responsibility to be appropriate, it must be the case that institutional agents have the capacity to act in pursuit of the eradication of global poverty. I will argue that the lack of motivation to pursue that end on the part of an institutional agent's individual constituents falls, in some cases, outside the control of the institutional agent and thus constrains its capacity to act. When this is the case, remedial responsibility must be located elsewhere.

## Chapter II: Remedial Responsibility for Global Poverty

Determining who is remedially responsible for global poverty on a pluralistic account involves taking into account each of the factors discussed in the previous chapter. Who are causally and morally responsible as well as communitarian concerns may affect the distribution of remedial responsibility. However, as we saw, it is imperative to first insure that the agents who are assigned remedial responsibility have the capacity to fulfill it. One implication of this requirement is that any agents who are economically incapable of assisting the global poor cannot be assigned remedial responsibility for global poverty regardless of the extent to which they are otherwise responsible for the situation. Any strategy aimed at the eradication of global poverty that assigns remedial responsibility to those without the economic means to contribute will surely fail. The agents who have remedial responsibility for global poverty must therefore come from among the global rich.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, “the global rich” is a vague category and requires some specification. Three questions must be addressed for a complete account of remedial responsibility for global poverty: (1) Who are the global rich? (2) Which agents from among them have remedial responsibility for global poverty? And (3) to what degree is each agent remedially responsible? These are crucial questions to answer in developing strategies for the eradication of global poverty. I will not here provide an answer to (3), nor will I spend much time addressing (1). The most straightforward way to define the global rich

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<sup>17</sup> Pogge (2002) makes a strong case for the causal responsibility for global poverty of the global rich on the basis of three different grounds of injustice, namely, “the effects of shared social institutions, the uncompensated exclusion from the use of natural resources, and the effects of a common and violent history” (199). Though I do not disagree with Pogge’s arguments, the position I am advancing is somewhat stronger. If it turned out that, those who in fact contributed in these ways to the impoverishment of the economically worst-off did not have the means to remedy the situation, and those who had the means had nothing to do with bringing about the bad situation, because of the necessity of capacity for remedial responsibility, only the latter should be assigned remedial responsibility.

is to simply take all those who fall within the one-fifth of the world's population who hold more than 85 per cent of the world's resources.<sup>18</sup> A substantive account of the responsibilities of each agent will require a more nuanced understanding of the constitution of this group, but this broad categorization will suffice for the time being. It should be noted that on this account, the global rich are not confined to those in the developed world. However, the large majority of the global rich can be expected to be found in the developed world.

The question of which agents from among the global rich hold remedial responsibility towards the global poor (question (2)) can be divided into two related questions: The first is the question of which *kinds* of agents hold remedial responsibility towards the global poor; the second question is which *specific* agents hold this responsibility. In what follows, I will focus only on the first question. In the next chapter, I will begin to answer the second question. A complete account of the specific agents who hold remedial responsibility to the global poor, however, requires a careful examination of empirical data which is beyond the scope of the present work.

It has been suggested that remedial responsibility in the case of large-scale global crises, such as global poverty, should be assigned to institutional agents rather than individual agents. Two main theses emerge from the literature in favour of treating institutional agents as the primary locus of remedial responsibility: What I will call *The Psychological Infeasibility Argument* says that treating individuals as the bearers of responsibility for large-scale global crises does not succeed in providing psychologically feasible guidelines for their behaviour. This argument is advanced by Samuel Scheffler

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<sup>18</sup> See Global Issues, "Poverty Facts and Stats"; available from <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Facts.asp#fact1>; accessed 2 April 2007.



(2001),<sup>19</sup> and it will be the focus of section II.2.1. *The Institutional Efficiency Argument* holds that institutional agents should be the primary bearers of remedial responsibility on account of their efficiency in remedying large-scale global crises. This point is emphasized by Henry Shue (1988) and Michael Green (2005), and will be the focus of the section II.2.2.

The Psychological Infeasibility and Institutional Efficiency arguments are not sufficient to support the claim that institutional agents should generally be treated as the primary locus of responsibility in the case of large-scale global crises: The infeasibility of treating individuals as the main bearers of responsibility does not entail the feasibility of assigning responsibility to institutional agents, and efficiency is not sufficient for effectiveness, or so I shall argue. Before elaborating on these arguments and showing why they are, alone and together, insufficient to claim that assigning remedial responsibility to institutional agents is feasible (II.3), I will briefly discuss the concept of institutional agency (II.2). In the final section (II.4), I will argue that the feasibility of assigning remedial responsibility to institutional agents depends on the individuals that they comprise being sufficiently motivated to support them and, when the relevant institutions do not already exist, for individuals to be sufficiently motivated to create them. As such, arguing for the feasibility of institutional remedial responsibility involves showing that individuals can be sufficiently and appropriately motivated. I will turn to a detailed discussion of individual motivation and its implications in the next chapter.

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<sup>19</sup>Scheffler does not actually conclude that remedial responsibility should be assigned to institutional agents rather than individuals, but he does, as we will see shortly, think that we should consider alternatives to treating individuals as the primary bearers of this responsibility in the case of large-scale global crises.

## II.1) Rawlsian Institutions and Institutional Agents

The concept of institutional responsibility is quite perplexing because responsibility presupposes agency, and it is not clear in what sense institutions have agency. According to Rawls (1999), for example, an institution is “a public system of rules which defines offices and positions with their rights, duties, powers and immunities” (47). According to this broad definition, legal systems, social systems, and cultural practices are all types of institutions. It is hard to see how, on the Rawlsian account, institutions can have the agency necessary to hold responsibility. Rawlsian institutions may be considered just or unjust, but not responsible. This is because institutions themselves do not act, but rather they determine and constrain the actions of the agents that they govern. It seems more fitting, then, to assign responsibility to the agents implicated in creating and implementing institutions. These agents may be individuals, but they may also be collectives. Some such collectives may be what Green refers to as “institutional agents.”

Green (2005) distinguishes the concept of institutional agency from institutions in the Rawlsian sense. He models his account of institutional agency on rational agency: Institutional agents are “entities that can make decisions and act on them” (123). They are organized collective agents, for example, governments, corporations, and international agencies.<sup>20</sup> Institutional agents can have individual agents or other subordinate institutional agents as their constituents. I will return to some questions

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<sup>20</sup> What, following Green (2005), I am here referring to as institutional agents elsewhere go by other names. See, for example, Philip Pettit (2007), who defines discusses “corporate agents,” or “corporations, organizations, and group agents” meaning entities that “operate through their members in such a way that they simulate the performance of individual agents” (172).

surrounding institutional agency, particularly with respect to autonomy, in section II.3.2. For the time being, however, I wish only to highlight the distinction between institutions in the Rawlsian sense as social structures, and institutional agents. Only the latter are capable of bearing responsibility, therefore they will be the main focus of the discussions to follow.

In light of this distinction, it is important to differentiate between the arguments for the assignment of remedial responsibility to institutional agents that will be discussed in the upcoming sections, and arguments for an institutional approach to global justice. The latter, advanced, for example, by Pogge (2005a), are arguments to the effect that the most conducive approach to achieving global justice is through the reform of Rawlsian institutions, that is through re-structuring the rules governing international relations. This view answers the question of how to best achieve global justice. Alternatively, the question I am interested in addressing here is which types of agents hold remedial responsibility for large scale global crises. These issues are not mutually exclusive: It may in fact be the case that the best way to achieve global justice involves the assignment of remedial responsibility for large-scale global crises to institutional agents. However, the claim that the reform of international institutions (in the Rawlsian sense) is necessary for global justice is not incompatible with the claim that individuals are the primary bearers of remedial responsibility for large-scale global crises.

## **II.2) Institutional Responsibility**

Recall that the assignment of remedial responsibility for global poverty is part of a strategy for the eradication of global poverty and that such strategies must be effective.

In order for a strategy to be effective, it must at least be feasible. For a strategy to be feasible, it must at least include an assignment of remedial responsibility that is itself feasible. This requires, among other things, that the agents assigned remedial responsibility have the capacity to fulfill that responsibility. Two arguments support the assignment of remedial responsibility to institutional agents: The first challenges the feasibility of assigning remedial responsibility for large-scale global crises to individuals, and instructs us to seek to locate remedial responsibility elsewhere. The second argues in favour of assigning remedial responsibility to institutional agents on the basis of their relative efficiency. Neither argument adequately addresses the question of whether institutional agents, if assigned remedial responsibility for global poverty, in fact have the capacity to fulfill it. As such, neither argument sufficiently demonstrates the feasibility of a strategy for the eradication of global poverty that includes the assignment of remedial responsibility to institutional agents.

### ***II.2.1) The Psychological Infeasibility Argument***

The Psychological Infeasibility Argument can be broadly characterized as follows:

- (A) The conception of individual normative responsibility widely held by individuals is restrictive;
- (B) The restrictive conception of responsibility is supported by a phenomenology of agency that is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future;
- (C) Holding the restrictive conception of responsibility prevents individuals from forming sufficient motivation to contribute to remedying bad situations that occur outside of their limited social environment;

(D) Therefore, the assignment of remedial responsibility for large-scale global crises, including severe poverty, to individuals is infeasible.

Scheffler (2001) argues along these lines. On his account, the restrictive conception of responsibility comprises two doctrines. First, negative duties are more stringent than positive duties. Second, individuals have special obligations to those near and dear to them (36). Two characteristics of individuals contribute to the pervasive, though tacit, acceptance of the restrictive conception of responsibility: One is the strong but implicit tendency of agents to conceive of social relations as “small-scale interactions, with clearly demarcated lines of causation, among individual agents” (39); the second is their phenomenology of agency. According to Scheffler, three tenets of the phenomenology of agency contribute to the acceptance of the restrictive conception of responsibility. First, we experience our acts as being of greater importance than our omissions; second, the magnitude of our causal influence seems to us a function of proximity; and third, we feel much less implicated in outcomes when they are the result of a group effect than when they result from only our own actions (39). On Scheffler’s account, it is the interaction of individuals’ beliefs about social relations and their experience of agency that impels them to accept the restrictive conception of responsibility.

Scheffler argues that globalization challenges the accuracy of this naïve and simplistic conception of social relations and this phenomenology of agency which is becoming “an increasingly poor guide to the dimensions of human action that are socially significant” (2001, 40). This, in turn, debases the widely-held restrictive conception of responsibility. Given the complex interconnectedness of individuals, it seems that a non-

restrictive, or at least a less restrictive conception of responsibility, that is, one in which some positive duties are taken to be as stringent as negative duties, and in which special obligations are not automatically prioritized, would be more appropriate. Scheffler, however, is sceptical about the extent to which individuals are capable of internalizing a non-restrictive conception of responsibility given the importance individuals tend to place on interpersonal bonds.<sup>21</sup> The wholesale internalization of a conception of responsibility that threatens what is generally taken to be a fundamental human value is unlikely.

Elizabeth Ashford (2003) responds that:

Certainly, an important part of our moral phenomenology is that effects for which we are primarily or solely responsible have the greatest impact on our sense of moral self-respect, and, consequently, on our sense of guilt.

However, in the modern context, we have strong reason to be wary of this phenomenology. (105-106)

Scheffler agrees with Ashford's suggestion that we ought to be wary of the phenomenology of agency that supports the restrictive conception of responsibility: our phenomenology *is* flawed in that it causes us to misrepresent the actual effects of our actions. However, Scheffler appends this observation with the claim that we cannot expect to successfully alter our phenomenology, at least in the short term, given the "depth and hold" the ideas of the restrictive conception have on us. He points in particular to the strength of the phenomenological force of its two doctrines (2001, 40). The upshot is that we can be as wary of our phenomenology as we want; we will still experience agency the same way. Scheffler advances not only a claim about our

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<sup>21</sup> Scheffler additionally provides reasons to doubt the moral desirability of non-restrictive conceptions of responsibility, but I will not treat this point here. See, in particular, Scheffler (2005), chapter 6.

traditional paradigm of responsibility, but a claim about human psychology as evidenced by his comment that

[w]hat we appear to lack (...) is a set of clear, action-guiding, and *psychologically feasible* principles which would enable individuals to orient themselves in relation to the larger processes, and general conformity to which would serve to regulate those processes and their effects in a morally satisfactory way. (2001, 45, my emphasis)

An assumption upon which Scheffler's argument rests is that our phenomenology of agency is not something that can be altered or revised in any straightforward way. This is not to say that the phenomenology of agency is stagnant.<sup>22</sup> The existing phenomenology of agency may eventually evolve to better suit the current state of affairs, but it is certainly not obvious how, when, or how fast this will happen. Moreover, Scheffler notes that correcting individuals' beliefs about social relations by placing more emphasis on "the significance of human affairs of various large-scale global developments (...) does not translate in any obvious way into a determinate picture of how ordinary individuals should conduct their lives" (2001, 43). Thus, in light of the improbability of success in altering the restrictive conception of responsibility, Scheffler suggests that a more conducive approach to addressing large-scale global crises involves abandoning our practice of treating the individual as the primary locus of responsibility. This, Scheffler concedes, leaves "our thinking about responsibility in some disarray" (46) since it is not clear where remedial responsibility, in many cases, should fall. A natural

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<sup>22</sup> As Green (2005) points out, it seems that there is a social evolutionary lag in people's moral intuitions: "A way of making this point is to contrast our society with the relatively small-scale static societies in which our commonsense moral code developed. One need not engage in excessive armchair anthropology to see how the restrictive conception would be adequate to regulate the major kinds of harm that people could inflict on one another in such societies" (112).

alternative to individuals as primary bearers of remedial responsibility for large-scale global crises are institutional agents.<sup>23</sup>

Whether individuals' lack of motivation to contribute to remedying large-scale global crises actually entails the infeasibility of assigning them remedial responsibility in such cases is debatable. I will raise some objections to the Psychological Infeasibility Argument in the next chapter. But even if it is the case that assigning remedial responsibility for large-scale global crises to individuals is infeasible, this provides no reason to think that assigning remedial responsibility to institutions is itself a feasible alternative. In fact, if the Psychological Infeasibility Argument holds, then there is little reason to think that assigning remedial responsibility to institutions will be feasible. This is because, as we will see in the next section, the capacity of institutions to act depends, in part, on the motivation of the individuals they comprise. If individuals are not sufficiently motivated to contribute to poverty relief, we need additional reasons to think that they would be motivated to create and support institutions aimed at eradicating global poverty. I will revisit this point in the next chapter.

### ***II.2.2) The Institutional Efficiency Argument***

The Institutional Efficiency Argument states that:

- (E) Institutions are more efficient than individuals when it comes to remedying large-scale global crises;
- (F) Therefore, institutions should be the main bearers of remedial responsibility for large-scale global crises.

According to Shue (1988), "it will often be the case that resources are best employed not in direct action but in maintaining and enhancing institutions that are

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<sup>23</sup> Green (2005) constructs his institutional approach on these grounds.



working to fulfill rights or, where no effective institutions exist, in creating and building them” (696). Similarly, Green thinks that treating institutions as the main bearers of responsibility is advantageous for several efficiency-related reasons. First, he signals that institutions are better at processing information about the consequences of their actions. Secondly, institutions are better equipped to alter mass behaviour. And thirdly, institutions can better handle the costs of regulating a problem.<sup>24</sup>

The advantage of locating remedial responsibility at the institutional level is clear in working to reduce global poverty. First, poverty is the result of the interaction of a variety of different causes. As such, the combined efforts of theorists with various specializations are necessary in order to determine the best approaches to alleviating it. Institutional agents are well suited to organize and oversee such collaborations. Second, given the scale of the crisis, institutional agents are necessary to coordinate efforts to relieve global poverty. The number of people affected by poverty and the difficulty of reaching them requires that institutional agents mediate between individual benefactors (of knowledge, funds, or time) and beneficiaries. Thirdly, institutions typically have access to financial resources that far exceed those of most individuals. Even when their funds are collected from individuals, the pooling of financial resources yields the financial power necessary to make the kinds of investments required to substantially reduce poverty.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See Green (2005), 124.

<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey Sachs (2006) recounts several successful international efforts to reduce poverty. Although different approaches were taken in each case, institutional involvement was central to every success story, undoubtedly for these reasons.

It is important to distinguish between two different versions of the Institutional Efficiency Argument that involve distinct interpretations of (F). One involves replacing (F) with

(F') Therefore, institutional agents, *as opposed to individuals*, should be the main bearers of remedial responsibility for large-scale global crises.

Green argues for (F') by claiming that there is a sense in which institutional responsibility is independent from, and of a different nature than individual responsibility (2005, 126). He emphasizes that his approach does not simply treat institutional agents as the means to the fulfillment of individuals' responsibilities: As independent agents, institutional agents actually possess a distinct set of responsibilities.

The other version of the Institutional Efficiency Argument interprets (F) as

(F'') Therefore, institutional agents should bear remedial responsibility in the case of large-scale global crises *as mediators of the responsibilities of individuals*.

Shue defends a version of this argument. In what follows, I will argue that success of both versions of the Institutional Efficiency Argument rely on the presupposition about the feasibility of assigning remedial responsibility to institutional agents. As we shall see, this assumption is problematic in some cases, particularly with respect to the motivation of the individual constituents of a given institutional agent. I will argue that the dependence of institutional agency on the motivation of individuals threatens the feasibility of assigning remedial responsibility to institutional agents in some cases.

### ***II.2.2.a) Collective Agency and Motivation***

Leaving aside debates over determinism and autonomy, rational agency, if at all possible, requires at least that agents act on the basis of intentions. Green does not specify the sense in which institutional agents can be said to have intentions independent of the aggregation of the intentions of their individual constituents. The literature on collective agency may provide some insight into what he could mean.

On Green's account, an institutional agent is a kind of collective agent. Taken as a species of collective agency, the concept of institutional agency inherits some of the theoretical challenges faced by the former. The possibility of collective agency, and likewise institutional agency, rests on the existence of shared intentions. There are various ways to understand shared intention. One approach is to understand shared intention as multiple individuals simultaneously having the same intention (or the intention to do the same thing). But this account does not capture the sense of shared intention relevant to collective agency because it would allow for coincidental occurrences of coordinated intentions between multiple agents to count as collective agency. Alternatively, one could argue that collective agents literally have mental lives independent of the individuals that they comprise. The collective agent, on this type of account, is some sort of superagent that emerges from the collection of individual agents. This account views shared intentions as mental states of superagents. This is implausible since it simply preserves the mysteriousness of collective agency by refusing to reduce it to anything less perplexing. This has little appeal as an account of collective agency since it offers little in the way of explanation.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> For more detailed discussions and rejections of these interpretations of shared intention, see Michael Bratman (1993) and David Velleman (1997).

More plausible accounts of shared intention define when concurrently held intentions of individuals count as shared intentions, and hence set the parameters for collective agency. Collective agency depends on the existence of a shared intention which in turn requires that the intentions of the relevant individuals stand in some special relation to one another. On this type of account, shared intention is not viewed as an attitude in any particular mind, but as “a state of affairs that consists primarily in the attitudes of the participants and interrelations between those attitudes” (Bratman 1993, 107-8). In particular, the intention of any given agent to  $\Phi$  is in accordance with and because of the conjunction of her own intention to  $\Phi$  and the intentions of the other relevant individuals to  $\Phi$ , and likewise for the other relevant individuals.<sup>27</sup>

If it is granted that intentions can be shared in a sense relevant to support collective agency, then institutions, as collective agents, can be said to have a different kind of agency than individuals since the kind of intention involved is different. This seems to be what Green is getting at. This shows that collective agency, and hence institutional agency, is possible *as distinct from* a collection of individuals with similar intentions; but it does not show that collective agents, and hence institutional agents, are *independent from* their individual constituents. This is because acting on shared intentions, regardless of how they are understood, relies on the motivation of the individuals comprised by the collective. Without showing that institutions have agency independent of the individuals they comprise, (E) is not sufficient grounds to draw the

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<sup>27</sup> See Bratman (1993), 102-107. Bratman includes further criteria in his final formulation, namely that the sub plans of the individuals do not conflict, and that the intentions and sub plans of the individuals are common knowledge between them. Velleman (1997) defends a similar account, but argues that intentions are not essentially mental entities and can therefore literally be shared.

conclusion (F') since the feasibility of assigning responsibility to institutions still relies, in part, on the motivation of individuals.

In order to argue that institutional agents are truly independent from individuals, one would have to argue for a sense in which institutional agents can have motivation that is both distinct from *and* not dependent on the motivational states of their individual constituents. I cannot think of a way that this could be done.

One may, at this point, question the apparent asymmetry between the constraints on capacity – and hence on feasibility – imposed by motivation in the cases of institutional agents and individual agents respectively. To say that an individual agent who is unmotivated to  $\Phi$  lacks the capacity to  $\Phi$  seems like a perversion of our general understanding of capacity.<sup>28</sup> As Marcia Baron (1995) argues, in the face of moral requirements that are very difficult to fulfill, appeals to the principle that “ought” implies “can” for the purpose of absolving oneself of one’s responsibility are fundamentally misguided. The lack of motivation to perform a given action may make that action very difficult to perform, but certainly not impossible. Difficulty does not entail impossibility. To regard very difficult acts as ones that cannot be performed is to undermine one’s freedom by acting as if one’s “particular fears, desires, and aversions positively preclude that [one] perform[s] certain acts” (Baron 1995, 45). There may be cases in which the motivation of an individual – or lack thereof – poses a genuine constraint on her freedom, namely in the case of motivational disorders such as depression and addiction. In these

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<sup>28</sup> Along these lines, in response to arguments against the requirement of impartiality in providing assistance to the effect that individuals lack the relevant motivation, Singer (2004) retorts that “impartialism is not beyond our physical powers. It is not even, strictly speaking, beyond our moral powers. Each of us is *capable* of acting impartially, even if most of us, most of the time, choose not to. (...) ‘Ought’ implies ‘can,’ not ‘is likely to’” (28). This view is compatible with the arguments that I advance in this and the next chapter concerning the motivation to fulfill remedial responsibility to distant others.

cases, we may not want to hold the person responsible for their motivational failings. But the fact that these conditions are counted as motivational *disorders* indicates that when motivation is functioning properly, it is something over which individuals have at least some control.

So why, then, does the motivation of the individual constituents of an institutional agent constrain its capacity for action? Motivation bears on the capacity of institutional agents (or collective agents) because they do not themselves have motivation. The motivation in question is that of the individual constituents of the institutional agent. That motivation, therefore, counts as a circumstance of that institutional agent, and not as a psychological fact about it. Institutions do not own this motivation in the way that individuals can own theirs. Unlike for individuals, the denial of an institutional agent's freedom is justified. Since institutional agency depends on the actions of the individuals it comprises, it is hard to see how an institutional agent could be held responsible for its members' motivational states. Responsibility, therefore, ultimately belongs to individual agents.

It may be objected that the agency of institutions does not necessarily depend on the motivation of *all* of its individual constituents. The actions of institutional agents are surely not always in accordance with the desired ends of all (or even the majority) of their constituents. This, however, does not challenge my point: That the motivation of only some individual constituents of an institutional agent is required still entails that the agency of institutions depends on the motivation of individuals. In a hierarchically-organized institutional agent, for example, if the executives are motivated to pursue a certain end, then it may be the case that it is not necessary for the subordinate members to

be equally motivated in order for the institution to act accordingly. Likewise, a small group of motivated subordinate constituents of an institutional agent may be able to pressure the executives to pursue a given end. Other such situations can be imagined, but the point remains that the capacity of an institutional agent to act is partly dependent on the motivation of *at least some* of its constituents. If no individual constituents of an institutional agent are sufficiently motivated to pursue a given end, or if those who are motivated are powerless within the institution, then that institutional agent lacks the capacity to act in pursuit of that end. A detailed examination of the internal dynamics of institutional agents is vital to providing an account of the various capacities of institutional agencies, but this is beyond the scope of the present work. I hope, rather, to have emphasized the dependence of institutional agency on the motivation of individuals and, in so doing, to have show that the feasibility of assigning remedial responsibility to institutions cannot be assessed without reference to the motivation of their individual constituents.

### ***II.2.2.b) Institutions as Mediators***

(F'') is somewhat more moderate than (F'). Proponents of this view argue that, since institutions are better suited than individuals to implement the measures necessary for the fulfillment of the remedial responsibilities of individuals, they should bear remedial responsibility as mediators between remedially responsible individuals and rights-holders. In a powerful defence of this view, Shue argues that the universal right to subsistence does not entail universal duties on the part of duty-bearers, but rather "full-coverage" of those rights which can be attained through a reasonable division of labour among duty-bearers (1988, 690). Remedial responsibility for global poverty, on this

account, needs to be assigned in a way that respects the limitations of individuals' resources as well as certain psychological constraints. Shue is sensitive to the fact that most individuals cannot afford to give even one cent to every starving person in the world. He equally acknowledges that "no one can in any practical way be positively concerned about five billion other people individually" (1988, 691). Both provide compelling reasons to look to institutional agents to mediate between duty-bearers and rights-holders. Compared to isolated individual efforts, the efficiency of institutional agents that work to coordinate the efforts of individuals is indisputable.

This view of the relationship between individuals and institutional agents avoids the objection that assigning remedial responsibility to institutional agents absolves individuals of theirs. Since institutional agents, on this account, serve as means for individuals to better fulfill their responsibilities, we need not deny the responsibility of individuals in arguing for the responsibility of institutional agents. In the case of global poverty relief, it is entirely consistent to hold that individuals have responsibilities of assistance and that institutional agents are better suited for acting on such responsibilities. And surely efficiency is of the utmost importance given the urgency and enormity of the global poverty crisis. The idea is not that individuals should be absolved of their responsibilities to the global poor, but rather that locating responsibility within institutional agents is more likely to translate into tangible, positive results. Assigning remedial responsibility to institutional agents need not be seen as a complete shift in responsibility away from individuals. Rather, it is a re-framing of the responsibilities of individuals. Claims Shue (1988):



[A]mong the most important duties of individual persons will be the indirect duties for the design and creation of positive-duty-performing institutions that do not yet exist and for the modification or transformation of existing institutions that now ignore rights and the positive duties that rights involve. (Shue 1988, 703)

This is a more modest position than the view that institutional agents bear remedial responsibility independent of their constituent individuals because it recognizes the dependence of institutional agents on individuals. However, in doing so, it admits to providing only a partial account of why institutions should bear remedial responsibility for large-scale global crises since it does not account for the motivation of individuals to fulfill the indirect duties of designing, creating, modifying, and supporting the relevant institutional agents. As with the Psychological Infeasibility Argument, the Institutional Efficiency Argument faces the challenge of showing that institutional agents can feasibly fulfill their remedial responsibilities. Given the motivation of individuals to fulfill their indirect duties, this argument for the assignment of remedial responsibility to institutional agents is very compelling; but the propriety of assigning remedial responsibility to an institutional agent still requires that the relevant individuals are sufficiently motivated to fulfill their associated duties.

### **II.3) Concluding Remarks**

Because neither adequately addresses the question of feasibility, neither the Psychological Infeasibility Argument nor the Institutional Efficiency Argument is sufficient to support a general assignment of remedial responsibility to institutional agents in the case of large-scale global crises. Establishing the feasibility of institutional responsibility involves showing that institutional agents have the capacity to fulfill their

remedial responsibility towards the global poor. Showing that an institutional agent has this capacity involves showing that the individual constituents with influence over its actions are sufficiently motivated. The claim that remedial responsibility in the case of global poverty falls on institutional agents tells us nothing of how and by whom such institutional agents are to be erected and sustained. I am not here concerned with providing a substantive account of how this is to be done; rather, I wish only to draw attention to the fact that individuals are still largely implicated in such an endeavour and, as such, assigning responsibility to institutions does not necessarily escape the problem of motivation.

Since there exists an asymmetric dependence of institutional agents on individuals, in assigning remedial responsibility to institutional agents there are still associated responsibilities for individuals, namely, to support such institutional agents and, in cases in which such agents do not exist, to create them. The nature of this responsibility is, of course, somewhat different from that which is incurred in a system of direct aid. The question is therefore whether the nature of individual responsibility, in this case, is adequately different as to have a positive impact on agents' motivation to fulfill their moral requirements. Are people differently or more easily motivated to support institutional agents than to provide direct aid? Making the case for the feasibility of assigning responsibility to institutions requires that this be shown. The answer, as we will see in the next chapter, will depend in part on the diagnosis of failures of compliance with the normative requirements of theories of individual responsibility.

### **Chapter III: Implications of Individual Motivation for Institutional Responsibility**

As we saw in the last chapter, the Psychological Infeasibility Argument and the Institutional Efficiency Argument for the assignment of remedial responsibility to institutional agents in the case of large-scale global crises do not, independently or together, succeed in showing that the assignment of remedial responsibility to institutional agents is always feasible. This would involve showing that institutional agents, if assigned remedial responsibility, have the capacity to fulfill it. Recall that the Psychological Infeasibility Argument claims that the assignment of remedial responsibility to individuals is infeasible due, in large part, to the phenomenology of agency that supports a restrictive conception of responsibility. The Institutional Efficiency Argument claims that institutions are better suited to remedy large-scale global crises and should thus be the primary bearers of this responsibility. I have argued that a moderate reading of the Institutional Efficiency Argument – one that portrays institutions as mediators of the responsibilities of individuals – provides compelling reasons to prefer the assignment of remedial responsibility to institutions when this is feasible. The feasibility of assigning remedial responsibility to institutions, however, varies as a function of the motivation of individuals.

I argued in the first chapter that being remedially responsible necessitates the capacity to remedy (or contribute to remedying) the bad situation in question. This is because the assignment of remedial responsibility is part of any strategy for remedying the given bad situation. In order to be effective, strategies for remedying bad situations must be feasible. If the agent assigned remedial responsibility does not have the capacity to fulfill it, then the strategy of which it is part is infeasible. We have also seen that the

capacity of institutional agents to act depends, in part, on at least some of the individuals that they comprise being sufficiently motivated. The purpose of this chapter is to expand on this claim by attempting to understand the relationship between the motivations of individuals and their implications for institutional agency and remedial responsibility, particularly in the case of global poverty.

After offering three interpretations of the Psychological Infeasibility Argument, I will consider the implication of each for the conclusion that remedial responsibility for global poverty ought to be assigned to institutional agents. As we will see, each case challenges the claim that the Psychological Infeasibility Argument counts in favour of assigning remedial responsibility to institutional agents. I will consider some ways in which the proponent of institutional responsibility could respond, and conclude by proposing a variation on the Psychological Infeasibility Argument that is more promising as support for the assignment of remedial responsibility for global poverty to institutional agents.

### **III.1) Interpretations of the Psychological Infeasibility Argument**

Recall the third premise of the Psychological Infeasibility Argument:

(C) Holding the restrictive conception of responsibility prevents individuals from forming sufficient motivation to contribute to remedying bad situations that occur outside of their limited social environment.

Understanding this claim about individual motivation is important to evaluating, on the basis of feasibility, the conclusion that institutions be treated as the main bearers of responsibility for large-scale global crises. Scheffler claims that individuals are

prevented by the interaction of their beliefs about social relations and their phenomenology of agency from internalizing a non-restrictive conception of responsibility. Consider this claim in the case of motivating individuals to contribute to global poverty relief. It could be interpreted as saying that, due to the interaction of their beliefs about social relations and their phenomenology of agency, individuals are incapable of judging that they ought to contribute to poverty relief. Alternatively, it could be interpreted as saying that, although individuals can judge themselves to have a duty to contribute to poverty relief, the interaction of their beliefs about social relations and their phenomenology of agency prevents that judgment from translating into the relevant motivation. Or perhaps we should understand it as saying that, although individuals can judge themselves to have a duty to contribute to poverty relief and have formed the corresponding motivation to do so, the interaction of their beliefs about social relations and their phenomenology of agency inhibits the related action by making other considerations seem more important. Scheffler's claim that individuals are prevented from internalizing a non-restrictive conception of responsibility by the interaction of their beliefs about social relations and their phenomenology of agency might, of course, be understood as advancing all three of these claims with respect to the motivation of individuals. A consideration of some concepts in moral psychology, I expect, will elucidate Scheffler's observations, as well as demonstrate the importance of distinguishing between the three readings when determining the feasibility of assigning responsibility to institutions.

### III.2) Moral Psychology

The moral psychology of motivation is broadly concerned with the relationships between agents' normative judgments, their motivations, and their intentional actions. Though a comprehensive discussion of the debates surrounding moral motivation is beyond the scope of the present work, in this section, I wish to draw attention to two questions, the answers to which have direct bearing on approaches to the eradication of global poverty. The first question is, *Is there a necessary connection between normative judgments and motivation?* The second question is, *What is the nature of the relationship between motivation and action?*

The first question is the source of much disagreement between motivational internalists (hereafter "internalists") and motivational externalists (hereafter "externalists"). Though internalism comes in several varieties, the recurring theme is that, for practically rational agents, there is a necessary connection between making normative judgments and the formation of corresponding motivation.<sup>29</sup> Conversely, externalists argue that the connection between normative judgments and the formation of motivation is contingent.<sup>30</sup> The disagreement between internalists and externalists is not over whether it is possible to make a normative judgment without forming the corresponding motivation; rather, the point at issue is whether such cases count as instances of irrationality. Whereas internalists argue that the lack of motivation following a normative judgement is symptomatic of practical irrationality, externalists resist this characterization pointing to amoralism as a counter-example. An amoralist is someone who is fully rational, yet unmoved by moral considerations. The typical

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<sup>29</sup> See Michael Smith (1994); and R. Jay Wallace (2005).

<sup>30</sup> See David Brink (1997), David Copp (1995, 1997), and Sigrun Svavarsdottir (2005).

internalist reply is that, if the amoralist is actually rational, then they have simply failed to make a genuine normative judgment.<sup>31</sup> In answer to the second question, both internalists and externalists deny that there is a necessary link between motivation and intentional action. Both accept that an agent's motivation based on a normative judgment may be overridden by stronger motivation to bring about different ends.

Agents' motivational conditions can be broadly categorized based on the relationships between judgments, motivation, and action. In what follows, I will consider the relevance of the various motivational conditions in which an agent could be found for the issue of poverty relief. On either an internalist or externalist account, an agent's failure to fulfill a given responsibility can be given one of three explanations:

- (1) The agent has not made the relevant normative judgment;
- (2) The agent is a rational amoralist or practically irrational (depending on whether one is an externalist or an internalist); or
- (3) The agent is overcome by the desire to fulfill some conflicting end.

These conditions correspond to three central questions relevant to a moral psychological analysis of the failure of the global rich to contribute to poverty relief:

- (1') Do agents in affluent nations judge that they have responsibilities of assistance towards the global poor?
- (2') When agents in affluent nations judge themselves to have responsibilities of assistance towards the global poor, do they form the relevant motivation to fulfill their responsibilities?

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<sup>31</sup> See, in particular, Smith (1994), 68-71.

(3') If agents in affluent nations form motivation on the basis of their judgments about their responsibilities of assistance to the global poor, is this motivation sufficient to outweigh the motivation to attain conflicting ends?

Note that these questions are reflected in the three interpretations of Scheffler's account of individual responsibility as applied to global poverty relief:

(1'') The interaction of their beliefs about social relations and their phenomenology of agency renders individuals incapable of judging that they ought to contribute to poverty relief;

(2'') The interaction of their beliefs about social relations and their phenomenology of agency inhibit individuals' development of motivation corresponding to their judgments of responsibility;

(3'') Despite making judgments about their responsibilities to the global poor and forming the corresponding motivation, the interaction of their beliefs about social relations and their phenomenology of agency make the fulfillment of individuals' conflicting ends seem more important.

### **III.3) The Feasibility of Institutional Responsibility**

The feasibility of assigning responsibility for global poverty relief to a given institutional agent will depend, in part, on which of the diagnoses outlined in the previous section is most characteristic of the failure of that institutional agent's individual constituents to contribute to poverty relief. It is quite reasonable to suppose that all three possibilities are instantiated within any given institutional agent, but the distribution of each condition will bear on the feasibility of the proposed strategy. In order to



demonstrate this, let us consider the implications of each motivational condition being characteristic of the majority of the individuals with influence over the actions of a given institutional agent, *I*.

### ***III.3.1) Failures to Form Judgments***

If the individuals that influence *I* are, for the most part, failing to judge that they have responsibilities to the global poor, it is not clear why they would agree to support an institution that is meant to help them discharge responsibilities they do not accept. This motivational condition can present itself in one of two forms: Either (a) people may fail to consider whether or not they have such responsibilities and thus fail to form judgments about them, or (b) people may, upon due reflection, reject the claim that they have responsibilities towards the global poor. Agents may fail to consider the question of their responsibilities to the global poor as a result of one, or a combination of several related factors: One possible explanation is that an agent may lack sufficient information concerning global poverty to make a considered judgment about it. This situation is increasingly uncommon given the pervasiveness and effectiveness of communications technology; although relative to popular topics such as war, crime, natural disasters, and domestic politics, global poverty does not receive a great deal of coverage in the mainstream media. This brings up two related reasons why agents may have simply never reflected on the question of their responsibility. One is that acute crises tend to be more attention-grabbing than chronic crises. Since global poverty is a persistent problem, it is less exciting and therefore less news-worthy than other, novel occurrences. Another reason is that people have a tendency to employ psychological coping mechanisms that unconsciously block information that causes negative affect. Since information about the

conditions of the worst-off people in the world can be very distressing, people tend to stifle such thoughts.<sup>32</sup> These observations are not meant to justify agents' insufficient reflection on the issue of global poverty; they are merely meant to suggest some explanations for the failure to have formed judgments about their responsibilities towards the global poor.

When people have considered the issue of global poverty and the question of their responsibilities towards the global poor, they may reflectively deny their responsibility. They may do so for several reasons: A person may deny their responsibilities towards the global poor for ideological reasons. They may embrace a strong form of nationalism that maintains that each state is responsible for the well-being of only their own citizens. Or, upon reflection, an agent may adopt a right-wing libertarian approach claiming that, seeing as they, themselves, have not caused global poverty, they are not responsible for remedying the situation. A final reason that agents may deny that they have responsibilities towards the global poor is that they overestimate the amount that their own governments are contributing to development. Empirical findings have shown that citizens of affluent nations grossly overestimate the extent of foreign development aid being provided by their governments.<sup>33</sup> Because they think that their governments are doing all that can be done, they do not think that they have any responsibilities towards

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<sup>32</sup> Judith Lichtenberg (2004) discusses some findings in social psychology that support the thesis that "most people adjust to the existence of suffering by believing in a 'just world'" (83). Stanley Cohen (2001) also offers an extensive psycho-social examination of the tendency, when "presented with information that is too disturbing, threatening, or anomalous to be fully absorbed or openly acknowledged" to repress, disavow, or reinterpret this information (1).

<sup>33</sup> See Lichtenberg (2004), 85-86; and Sachs (2005), 340. Both refer to the Program on International Policy Attitudes (<http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/btdevelopmentaidra/135.php?nid=&id=&pnt=135&lb=brusc>) carried out by the University of Maryland in 2001 that found that the majority of Americans overestimated the amount of foreign aid provided by the government by as much as eighteen times the actual amount.

the global poor. Compelling refutations to each of these perspectives have been provided<sup>34</sup>, but I will not discuss them here. The point is not whether these positions are tenable, but rather that people do in fact hold them, and that holding any or all of these positions inhibits the formation of the judgment that one ought to assist the global poor which, in turn, hinders the formation of motivation to do so.

If the individuals with influence over the actions of institutional agent *I* do not judge themselves to be remedially responsible towards the global poor, assigning responsibility to *I* will surely be no more feasible as part of a strategy for relieving global poverty than assigning remedial responsibility to its individual constituents. Reform of existing international institutions and creation of them where they are lacking will have costs for individuals in affluent nations. These costs may be less than the costs of compliance in a system of direct-aid; but if most individuals in these nations do not accept their own (partial) remedial responsibility for the plight of the global poor, they will claim to have no reason to consent to the imposition of any costs at all.

Institutional agents whose individual constituents do not judge themselves to have remedial responsibility towards the global poor do not, for this reason, have the capacity to act in accordance with the requirements of any remedial responsibility assigned to them. Alternative approaches would have to be considered, for example: If most people have not adequately reflected on the question of their responsibilities towards the global poor, the dissemination of relevant information would be a logical first step towards the eradication of global poverty. On the other hand, if the majority of people in affluent nations fall into the second category, namely that they reflectively deny their responsibilities towards the global poor, what would be required is further discourse in an

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<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Pogge (2002, 2005) and Sachs (2005).

effort to alter their beliefs about their responsibilities. It could be argued that both these steps would best be carried out by institutions, but this threatens infinite regress: At some point, responsibility must be acknowledged by individuals in order for the assignment of responsibility to institutions to be a feasible strategy.

### ***III.3.2) Failures to Form Motivation***

A second reason for the failure of the global rich to adequately assist the global poor is that agents in affluent nations, despite having judged themselves to be remedially responsible to the global poor, fail to form any motivation based on this judgment. From the standpoint of moral psychology, this situation can be understood in a variety of ways. On an externalist account, such agents are considered rational amoralists because they recognize a responsibility, but fail to be moved by its normative force. This is because normative judgments alone are insufficient for motivation on this type of account: Motivation requires the presence of an additional mental state, usually a desire. Internalists, by contrast, argue that the judgment that one has a given responsibility is sufficient for the formation of the corresponding motivation to fulfill that responsibility. As such, internalists can account for the case in which an agent lacks motivation altogether in one of two ways: On the one hand, the internalist could argue that the agent has not in fact made the judgment that he is remedially responsible towards the global poor. He may claim that he has made this judgment, but his lack of motivation reveals that he has only made the judgment superficially and does not really believe it to apply to him. Alternatively, the internalist can claim that the agent, having made the judgment that he is remedially responsible towards the global poor and having not formed any motivation to fulfill this responsibility, is practically irrational.

If it is the case that the individuals with influence over *I* are largely rational amoralists or practically irrational, there is no reason to suppose that assigning remedial responsibility for global poverty to *I* will be any more feasible than treating its individual constituents as the bearers of responsibility. If individuals are failing to form motivation on the basis of their normative judgements, then it is not clear from where they would acquire the motivation to create and support institutional agents, such as *I*, that are necessary to eradicate global poverty. Perhaps if there were a minority of sufficiently motivated individuals capable of forming just institutional agents that would conceivably impose minor burdens on the general population, rational amoralists or practically irrational agents would not oppose such impositions, but this is mere speculation. The point is that if this motivational condition is characteristic of the majority of the global rich, the success of assigning responsibility for global poverty relief to institutional agents will be highly contingent, and not obviously feasible.

### ***III.3.3) Competing Motives***

A final explanation for the failure of the global rich to make a significant contribution to the eradication of global poverty could have to do with their motivation to do so being outweighed by the motivation to pursue other, competing ends. Recall that motivation, on any psychological account, does not entail action. Presumably, motivation works on a *ceteris paribus* model: All things being equal, if an agent is motivated to *X*, then she will *X*. But what about when an agent is motivated both to *X* and to *Y*, and she cannot do both? It is reasonable to predict that she will ultimately perform the act that she is most motivated to do. The experience of conflicting motives is familiar to most people, certainly to anyone who has ever been on a diet, quit smoking,

had a job they needed but hated, and so on. There is intuitive reason to think that a similar conflict arises between the desire to self-indulge and the desire to help distant others. But why does the motivation to assist the global poor get outweighed so easily? And why is such a moral atrocity not more salient?

One reason that individuals from among the global rich may find their motivation to assist the global poor is outweighed by other motives is that, for the most part, the poor are very far away, both physically and socially. With few exceptions, people suffering from extreme poverty are too distant to be salient stimuli for those who are capable of assisting them. The link between empathy and moral motivation has been supported by psychological research that shows that the motivation to assist a person in need decreases when empathy is minimal or lacking.<sup>35</sup> And since distance makes empathy more difficult, this is an obvious obstacle to the formation of sufficiently strong motivation to assist the global poor.<sup>36</sup> Another reason agents' motivation to assist the global poor may be overridden by competing motives is that they recognize their individual contribution to assist the poor to be so minimal that it can have no real impact. Lichtenberg (2004) refers to this as the sense of futility and ineffectiveness that derives from the fact that "one-shot solutions, few-shot solutions, rarely work" (85). Assisting the global poor is a long-term commitment with small returns for individual benefactors. If people do not think that they can make a big impact, they may think it is not worthwhile to make any positive

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<sup>35</sup> See C. Daniel Batson and Tacia Moran (1999), and Augusto Blasi (1999).

<sup>36</sup> See Lichtenberg (2004) and Lukas H. Meyer (2000). Meyer's focus is on our responsibilities to future generations, but much of what he says applies equally to our responsibilities to distant others. In particular, he suggests that "the particularity of persons, the details we know about them, seems to be a condition of their having the capacity to arouse love or concern or other strong feelings in us" (641). The lack of particular knowledge of future people obstructs empathy and hence motivation. He claims that the case is less severe for contemporaries since the logical possibility of gaining such knowledge exists. However, it is not clear what would motivate people to seek particular knowledge about geographically distant contemporaries, particularly for the purpose of assisting them. As such, the empathy problem applies equally to distant contemporaries as it does to future people.

contribution at all. Furthermore, it is not always clear to agents who are both willing and able to assist the global poor how they should go about doing so. As such, they may have motivation to assist the global poor, but without a clear idea of how to go about it, they may choose to direct their resources elsewhere. These situations present us with a paradox: Institutional agents are natural candidates for specifying the responsibilities of individuals and insuring that they are fulfilled and coordinated with the efforts of other individuals. Yet, absent sufficient motivation on the part of individuals, it is not clear how such institutions are to function. A final reason that the motivation to assist the global poor might be outweighed by other motives has to do with the aforementioned tendency towards denial in the case of distressing information. Given this tendency, we may perceive personal or domestic problems to be more pressing than global poverty when, in fact, they are not. It is worth reiterating that my purpose here is neither to defend nor criticize these reasons. Rather, the point is to assess whether assigning remedial responsibility to institutions is feasible given the actual motivation of individuals.

If the majority of the individuals with influence over the actions of institutional agent *I* consistently find their motivation to help distant others outweighed by their more proximate and immediate interests, it is not obvious that they will be sufficiently motivated to support *I* in fulfilling its remedial responsibility for global poverty, or to reform or create the relevant institutional agents.

### **III.4) Does the Psychological Infeasibility Argument Support Institutional Responsibility?**

The Psychological Infeasibility Argument was introduced as an argument in favour of treating institutional agents as the primary bearers of remedial responsibility for large-scale global crises including global poverty. But if the above implications are true, then it is not clear that it succeeds: The reasons that the assignment of remedial responsibility to individuals is infeasible appear to make infeasible the assignment of remedial responsibility to institutional agents. The proponent of shifting remedial responsibility for global poverty to institutional agents has two mutually compatible options. The first is to claim that there is something about assigning remedial responsibility to institutional agents that will positively affect the motivation of individuals to support them and to create them when they are lacking. A second option is to concede that in many cases, the assignment of remedial responsibility to institutional agents is not feasible, but that it may not always be so. Let us consider each of these possibilities in turn.

#### ***III.4.1) The motivational efficaciousness of institutional responsibility***

My argument has so far focused on the dependence of institutional agency on individual motivation. Influence, however, runs in both directions. Empirical research has supported the general hypothesis that people behave differently and according to different motivations when they are acting as part of a group.<sup>37</sup> It can be inferred, then, that institutional agents, as types of group agents, contribute to the psychology of their individual constituents. The assignment of remedial responsibility for global poverty to a

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<sup>37</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the research supporting various group phenomena including *social facilitation*, *social loafing*, *free-rider effects*, *deindividuation*, and *groupthink*, see David G. Myers and Steven J. Spencer (2001), chapter 8.



given institution may help to shape the judgments and motivations of its individual constituents. Consider the following ways in which assigning remedial responsibility to institutional agents may itself be motivationally efficacious: (1) Being part of an institutional agent that is widely thought to be remedially responsible for global poverty may lead to judgments on the part of its individual constituents concerning their related responsibilities. (2) Where individuals judge themselves to hold remedial responsibility towards the global poor, viewing the institutional agent(s) to which they belong as vehicles for more effectively discharging their responsibilities may strengthen their motivation to support the relevant institutional efforts. (3) The requirements on individuals associated with institutional agents holding remedial responsibility may be sufficiently different – though not necessarily less demanding - from those of providing direct aid that the motivation of individuals becomes sufficient for action. These are but a few examples meant to illustrate how holding institutional agents remedially responsible for global poverty may positively affect the motivation of their individual constituents to pursue the eradication of poverty via the institutional agents to which they belong.<sup>38</sup>

But acknowledging the influence of institutional participation on individuals does not alone solve the problem: What if existing institutions are not exerting the appropriate influence on individuals? In cases where the structure and policies of the institutional agent are not motivationally efficacious for its members, we need an account of how

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<sup>38</sup> The idea that assigning remedial responsibility to institutional agents whose individual constituents are not, at this point, sufficiently motivated to make the appropriate institutional action feasible is along the lines of what Pettit refers to as a developmental approach to responsibility. He suggests that holding institutional (or “corporate”) agents responsible despite their lack of autonomous agency may motivate individual constituents to support the reforms necessary for the institutional agent to discharge its responsibility. See Pettit (2007), 192-198.

individuals will come to be motivated. Two possibilities come to mind: The first involves the power of small groups of motivated individuals within an institutional agent. Especially where the majority of individuals already have some motivation to create and support institutions that will help them fulfill their responsibilities towards the global poor (i.e. they fall into the third category), the initiation of reforms by a small group of highly motivated individuals is likely to have encouraging results. This, however, provides a further condition under which the assignment of remedial responsibility to institutional agents may be feasible, but it cannot account for all cases.

#### ***III.4.2) Context-dependence and the dynamic nature of feasibility***

A second way of rescuing the Psychological Infeasibility Argument is to reconsider the second premise:

(B) The restrictive conception of responsibility is supported by a phenomenology of agency that is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

If it is the case that holding the restrictive conception of responsibility makes the assignment of remedial responsibility to institutions just as infeasible as its assignment to individuals, then it may be worth considering whether this conception is as deeply-rooted as Scheffler supposes. The claim that the current phenomenology of agency is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future has intuitive force especially in light of the relative novelty of experimental psychology. But like other empirical sciences, psychological research is in part motivated by its potential application. That is, the purpose of trying to understand human psychology is, in part, to be able to manipulate it. Since the empirical study of psychology is relatively new, that there are aspects of our psychology - including our phenomenology of agency - that seem at this point unalterable (or not obviously

alterable) does not preclude further discoveries from eventually resulting in a clearer idea of how this could be achieved.<sup>39</sup> If the claim that the phenomenology of agency that underlies the restrictive conception of responsibility is unalterable seems intuitive, it may be worth considering the extent to which its intuitive appeal is itself motivated by the urge to deny our own responsibility in the matter.

Perhaps it is the case that, right now, we do not have the requisite knowledge to determine how to go about changing the phenomenology of agency in order that individuals be able to adopt a more cosmopolitan outlook. But this does not necessarily yield the conclusion that we should simply seek to assign remedial responsibility elsewhere. Rather, what is called for is further research in the psychology of motivation. Some such research is currently being done by those interested in, for example, helping behaviour and altruism.<sup>40</sup> Because global poverty provides the particular motivational challenge of requiring empathy to extend beyond the limits of our social circles and the outside the bounds of nationality, more work needs to be done towards determining what factors could eventually motivate a more cosmopolitan ethos.

Feasibility is both context-sensitive and dynamic. What is not feasible in one context may be feasible in another context; and what is infeasible at this point in time may, at some point in the future, become feasible. The claim that the phenomenology of agency that underlies holding the restrictive conception of responsibility is something that cannot be changed in the foreseeable future is, I think, hasty. It may be the case that

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<sup>39</sup> The idea of psychological manipulation can seem rather unsettling. But the influence of the media, politicians, art, literature, those around us, and a host of other factors (more or less intentionally) impacts our outlook, experiences, and behaviour. By providing a better understanding of how these stimuli influence us can be empowering. The idea of this information being used to increase the effectiveness of psychological manipulation may be daunting, but knowledge of how we can be influenced can also shield us from unwanted influences.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Blasi (1999), Baton and Moran (1999), Leonard Ray (1998), and Ervin Staub (1978, 1979).

this phenomenology of agency inhibits the formation of sufficient motivation to contribute to the eradication of global poverty, be it through direct aid or through the creation and support of the relevant institutions; but there is no reason to suppose that this is necessarily or inherently so. If anything is characteristic of human nature, it is our capacity for psychological flexibility in light of new information and stimuli, and not our phenomenology of agency. If the lack of motivation on the part of individuals makes the assignment of remedial responsibility to institutions infeasible in some cases or at this point in time, we should not conclude that it will be infeasible in all cases and for all time. Says Singer (2004):

[W]e do not know how difficult it might be to persuade people to give more weight to benefits to other peoples. We have scarcely begun the task of educating people toward taking a larger and more generous perspective. (25)

### **III.5) Concluding Remarks**

The arguments for the remedial responsibility of institutional agents, particularly as presented by Scheffler and Green, merely pass the buck to institutions on the basis of the inadequacy of individuals and the efficiency of institutional agents relative to them. A point I wish to emphasize is that remedial responsibility cannot be shifted to institutional agents so readily. We must respect the feasibility of doing so and, as such, we must take into account, among other factors, the motivation of individuals to create and support the necessary institutions.

If the reason to assign remedial responsibility to institutions in the effort to eradicate global poverty has to do with the motivational failings of individuals, then it is

not clear that the feasibility of assigning remedial responsibility to institutional agents has been adequately accounted for. I have proposed some ways in which this may be done. The approach that I advocate is one that acknowledges that we cannot generalize about the infeasibility of assigning remedial responsibility for global poverty to individuals or about the feasibility of assigning it to institutional agents. It may be the case that some institutions may be very well suited to take on this remedial responsibility. In the current global context, NGOs such as Oxfam and World Vision come to mind because they are typically composed of individuals dedicated to the cause. Of course, there are problems associated with having NGOs as the primary agents of international justice,<sup>41</sup> but it may be the case that some governments are not yet in a position to take on such responsibility. In this case, remedial responsibility may be shared by certain NGOs and individuals in nations whose governments are not yet able to take on remedial responsibility.

The Institutional Efficiency Argument provides strong reasons to prefer the assignment of remedial responsibility for global poverty to institutions when this is in fact feasible. Paired with the view that individual psychology is changeable and that feasibility is, at least in this respect, dynamic, there is good reason to aim at the eventual assignment of remedial responsibility for global poverty to institutions. In the meantime, it is important to be sensitive to the motivation of individuals in assigning remedial responsibility.

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<sup>41</sup> The prolonged responsibility of non-state actors including NGOs poses a problem because, for the most part, they lack meaningful powers of coercion, and they are not representative bodies. See Onora O'Neill (2005), 38, 47-50.

## Conclusion

The field of development economics is moving in the direction of a more nuanced, context-sensitive approach. Development economists are decreasingly concerned with finding universal axioms of development; rather, they are becoming sensitive to the various internal and external political, social, cultural, environmental, and geographical factors that may affect the economic development of any given region. Sachs (2005), for example, calls for what he terms a clinical approach to development economics. Applying lessons from clinical medicine, he emphasizes the need to properly diagnose the economic problems within developing nations in order to determine the best strategy for elevating them from extreme poverty.<sup>42</sup> Any such strategy, however, requires the cooperation of global institutions that are fundamentally run and supported by individuals. As such, any feasible strategy also demands a diagnosis of the motivation of the relevant individuals to implement it. If it turns out that the agents whose cooperation is required in the implementation of the strategy are not sufficiently motivated to act accordingly, the strategy will not be effective because it is not feasible.

I hope to have illustrated how understanding the motivational condition of agents can inform assessments of strategies aimed at addressing large-scale global crises. While there is some evidence that citizens in affluent nations support an increased contribution to foreign aid on the part of their governments,<sup>43</sup> and intuitive reason to think that

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<sup>42</sup> See chapter 4, "Clinical Economics", in particular. MIT economist Abhijit Vinayak Banerjee supports a similar approach. For an interesting and accessible discussion, see Banerjee (2007).

<sup>43</sup> The PIPA study mentioned in chapter III as well as a subsequent study published in 2005 ([http://www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/ForeignAid/WorldPoverty\\_Jun05/WorldPoverty\\_Jun05\\_rpt.pdf](http://www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/ForeignAid/WorldPoverty_Jun05/WorldPoverty_Jun05_rpt.pdf)) show that Americans overwhelmingly support a much higher percentage of the federal budget being allocated to foreign aid than is the case now. However, the same study also shows that Americans have considerable reservations about foreign aid, particularly with respect to its effectiveness, and that they think that domestic poverty has higher priority. It is therefore not clear to what extent they would support the institutional changes that would accompany increasing foreign aid.

individuals are more likely to support institutions that aim to eradicate global poverty than to make personal contributions, what is needed is further research in the (conceptual and empirical) psychology of motivation in order to obtain a more thorough diagnosis. One implication of the distinctions introduced in the previous chapter is that the diagnosis of the capacity of one institutional agent may differ from that of another based on the motivation of its individual constituents. As such, the effectiveness of strategies for the eradication of global poverty will vary as a function of the motivational condition of the individual constituents in question.

My conclusion is modest, but nevertheless important: The assignment of remedial responsibility for global poverty needs to be context-sensitive. The context in the case of institutional agents includes the motivation of their individual constituents. Another important factor that must be taken into account along with individual motivation is the constitution of institutional agents. The implications of the motivation of individual constituents will depend largely on the internal dynamics of the institutional agent to which they belong. But regardless of how an institutional agent is organized, its capacity to act in pursuit of the eradication of global poverty will depend on at least some of its individual constituents being sufficiently motivated to pursue that end. In the absence of the motivation of its individual constituents to contribute to poverty relief, an institutional agent should not be assigned remedial responsibility for global poverty because it lacks the capacity to act accordingly.

On this approach, remedial responsibility lands ultimately with individuals. Though institutional agents will often be better suited to discharge these responsibilities and, as such, inherit remedial responsibility when this is feasible, there will always be

related responsibilities for individuals. The problem of global poverty is not only a political issue, but a moral one as well; yet there is a lacuna in the literature specifying the precise responsibilities of individuals with respect to the massive deprivations suffered by millions of people. Singer's notorious individual-centred approach has been criticized for, among other things, being politically acontextual. By allegedly being insensitive to the various political circumstances that contribute to the perpetuation of extreme poverty, Singer is charged with calling for action on the part of individuals that may not be effective and could potentially do more harm than good.<sup>44</sup> Singer's approach may indeed be flawed<sup>45</sup>, but its virtue is that it gives clear instructions to individuals concerning their moral responsibilities. Much of the literature that emphasizes the role and responsibility of global institutions and international relations between states, though indispensable, fosters the abstract politicization of the role of individuals in the fight against global poverty.

As I mentioned earlier, an important question has to do with the specific nature of the responsibilities of each agent. When institutional agents are not fit to be held remedially responsible, the responsibilities of individuals may include the reform of existing institutional agents and the creation of new institutional agents that can feasibly discharge remedial responsibility for global poverty. In cases where institutional agents are fit to hold remedial responsibility for global poverty, individuals still have associated responsibilities as the constituents of these institutions. A substantive account of the

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<sup>44</sup> Kuper (2005) insists that Singer's approach presents global poverty relief as a simple matter requiring only the financial support of those in a position to help. This view, he argues, is likely to produce effects contrary to those desired because it directs people to allocate a significant portion of their income to aid when there are more effective ways for them to contribute such as purchasing goods from manufacturers committed to fair trade and high labour standards, and vacationing in developing countries. Kuper furthers his argument by signalling cases in which aid money actually fans the flames of injustice by finding its way to despotic rulers rather than those in need.

<sup>45</sup> Though perhaps not as gravely as Kuper suggests: See Singer's (2005) reply.



moral requirements on individuals in the case of global poverty requires that remedial responsibility be appropriately assigned. This will involve establishing which existing institutional agents are currently fit to be held remedially responsible, which institutional agents could be brought to that point, and when individuals are the primary bearers of remedial responsibility.

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