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'Explaining Inaction in the Face of Extreme Poverty'

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The problem of extreme poverty is both pressing and pervasive: around one third of human deaths result from poverty-related causes each year and over one billion people lack the basic goods and services that are needed to get by. At the same time, people living in rich countries have the capacity to assist those living in poverty by providing time and money to the best-performing aid and development organizations. Against this backdrop, philosophers have long been interested in the question of how much people are required to do, on an individual basis, to assist those whose lives are threatened by malnutrition and disease. Far less attention has been paid to the fact that few people living in Britain or the United States make contributions *of any size* to organizations working in this area, or to the fact that most people fall far short of what even minimal accounts of morality require.¹ Yet, this also warrants attention.

To begin with, inaction in the face of extreme poverty sits in tension with many of the moral values that affluent people consciously affirm. While people living in liberal democratic societies tend to assert that human life is of ultimate and universal value, their neglect of those living in poverty casts doubt on the truth of this claim. Secondly, this pattern of behavior remains curiously resistant to introspection. When asked why they don't do more to help out, affluent people often encounter a strange sense of dissociation or bemusement: it is a question that they feel poorly positioned to answer. This also needs to be explained. Thirdly, most accounts of practical reason hold an agent who is rational and informed will do what she has most reason to do.² Yet, this insight points towards a number of interesting possibilities in the present case. After all, it is plausibly true that affluent people have decisive reason to help those living in extreme poverty today. This is because life-saving assistance could often be provided at little personal cost to the giver. However, the fact they do not assist would then appear to indicate that they are in the grip of false belief or rational error on a serious scale.³ This, in turn, has important ramifications for practitioners who are working to address extreme poverty directly, and also for philosophers who want to understand the character and limits of altruistic motivation. Without a clearer picture of the obstacles that people face when thinking about global problems it will be difficult to know how to proceed.

In order to explain inaction under these conditions, this paper looks more closely at the way in which ordinary people deliberate about the problem of global poverty and the possibility of assistance. To begin with, I consider the claim that false empirical beliefs explain inaction, focusing on those regarding poverty itself, the effectiveness of aid, the cost of doing more, and the amount that is already being done in this area. Finding these explanatory resources to be inadequate, the second section then looks more closely at the kind of value judgments that affluent people make. Specifically, it investigates the notion that they do not value human life, that they place a large personal premium on their own well-being, or that they judge those living in poverty to be undeserving of assistance. While there is some truth in these claims, I argue that they too are not sufficient to explain inaction in the majority of cases. To address these difficulties, the third section looks at the way in which people deliberate about assistance, drawing heavily upon findings from experimental psychology. Using the insights contained by prospect theory, I argue that procedural bias and faulty reasoning are important factors that lead deliberation astray in this context. Unlike the earlier considerations, the influence of these factors is general and robust. The final section looks at the question of motivation in greater detail and asks whether affluent people might be akratic, and hence fail to form the intention to act. However, it rejects this claim in favour of an explanation that is compound in form: false belief, partiality and deliberative error lead the affluent to embrace mistaken conclusions about what they have reason to do in this context. Once we appreciate this fact, the further claim about akrasia becomes unnecessary.

1. Beliefs About the World

When affluent people deliberate about whether to assist those living in extreme poverty they do so in light of beliefs about the state of the world and their own place in it. According to classical decision theory, a rational agent will choose the course of action that she believes contains the greatest expected utility or value. In order to conclude that assistance is warranted, people who deliberate about this matter must first understand that they can prevent serious harm, at little cost to themselves, and also that they have not already taken action that is sufficient for this purpose. In this context, the mistaken belief that extreme poverty does not harm

those whose lives it affects, that assistance is squandered, that it is prohibitively expensive, or they already do enough to address the problem, could explain their widespread failure to do more.

i. The Reality of World Poverty

When asked about world poverty few people express surprise that the phenomenon exists. Almost everyone living in the United States and the United Kingdom is aware that there are millions of people around the world who live in a state of hunger and acute susceptibility to disease. This information is frequently found in the media, and also in the publications of advocacy organizations. Furthermore, the plight of those living in poverty is usually thought to warrant immediate attention. A recent survey found that 73% of the British population reported being 'concerned' or 'very concerned' about the level of poverty in poor countries.⁴ In the United States, a similar survey found that 86.6% of people favored the provision of food and medical assistance to people in need overseas.⁵

Against this, it is sometimes suggested that people tend to underestimate how bad extreme poverty is because they do not realize that the \$1.25 dollar per day benchmark, used to measure poverty, already takes into account price differentials between countries. Limited direct experience of severe material deprivation may also prevent them from fully understanding the seriousness of this situation.⁶ However, the condition of extreme poverty continues to have very serious associations in the minds of most people with the mental transition from poverty to famine, disease and mortality, being easily made. Furthermore, surveys indicate that measures designed to tackle extreme poverty are often held to be a key international priority for affluent nations.⁷ Taken together, these findings suggest that people recognize that extreme poverty has a serious human cost and that its eradication is an important aim.

ii. The Capacity to Assist

At the same time, affluent people tend to believe that their own individual or collective capacity to assist people living in this condition is heavily circumscribed, with a small minority of the population doubting the possibility of assistance

altogether. Those in the latter category tend to endorse deterministic theses about the causes of poverty, such as the notion that overpopulation is the root of this condition – and to infer from this that any effort to prolong life today will only yield further suffering in the long run.⁸ More commonly, corruption and lack of education are cited as the major contributors to poverty, with natural disasters, war and conflict also playing a significant role.⁹ Among these considerations, beliefs about corruption are perhaps the most important. Indeed, a large segment of the British public (57 percent) agree with the statement that ‘corruption in poor countries makes it pointless to donate money’ and a further 53 percent agree with the more general statement that ‘most financial aid in poor countries is wasted.’¹⁰ Similar findings hold true for the United States, where more than half of people surveyed (53.4 percent) agree that ‘the corruption of governments in African countries is so widespread that US aid does little good there. The US should stop throwing good money after bad.’¹¹ These studies show that the idea of local elites siphoning off resources that have been set aside for assistance, looms large in the public imagination of both societies – a fear that may be then compounded by the idea of a wasteful bureaucracy squandering resources.¹² Indeed, skepticism about the efficacy of assistance appears to be the predominant trend.

iii. Inflated Costs

Beliefs about the cost of assistance are perhaps the most difficult to ascertain, varying both according to the specific outcome in question and the degree of confidence that people are required to have in this goal being achieved. Anecdotal evidence suggests that people tend to disbelieve extremely low-end claims about the price for which assistance can be provided but that they are prepared to accept mid-range estimates (that take administrative overheads into consideration). A quick survey of advocacy materials reveals claims such as the following: a single donation of ‘£18 can provide safe water for twenty people’, ‘£25 pounds could provide 35 pregnant women with HIV tests to help protect their baby’ and ‘£134 would pay for a measles vaccination for 1500 children’.¹³ Statements about the efficacy of assistance can be presented in different ways. Given that these figures are designed to engage

and motivate potential donors, they provide some idea of price range for which the British public believes assistance can be rendered.

Beliefs about the cost of assistance are also complicated for another reason. In order to know what affluent people think, these sums then need to be indexed to a further set of beliefs concerning the way in which the retention or allocation of this money would impact on their own lives. This paper addresses the class of people for whom the sums mentioned so far are not a lot of money. However, it is not clear that affluent people conceive of such expenditure in this light. In practice, there are a variety of sociological and psychological factors that lead people to support the view that they stand to incur a large personal cost by using their money in this way.

To begin with, people who live in high-income countries tend to believe that material wealth and commodities are a major determinant of what makes their lives go well. In practice, there is considerable evidence that this not the case: that experiences and relationships are the most important source of happiness.¹⁴ However, the prevalence of a materialistic outlook leads people to think that their lives would go worse, should they cut back on luxury purchases, than is actually the case. Secondly, there is a temptation, encouraged by the market, to believe that one's own welfare is related to the welfare of others in a zero-sum manner. Again, this is not the case: experiments show that money given to others is often good for the giver.¹⁵ Yet, viewed through the prism of economic self-interest, money used in this way can appear to be a dead loss for the contributing agent.¹⁶ Thirdly, there is evidence that most people believe that they live closer to a condition of objective need than is actually the case.¹⁷ If they deliberate on the mistaken assumption that their basic needs would not be met if they were to donate more, then their beliefs about the cost of assisting will again be off the mark. Finally, research from experimental psychology shows that people are often bad at judging the effect of future events on their own well-being. Due to the propensity to focus disproportionately on the money that they would forgo, and failure to think about how they would adjust to different situations, prospective losses often appear to be greater than they turn out to be.¹⁸ Taken together, these factors lead people to attach inflated significance to even small sums of money.

iv. What We Do Already

A final set of beliefs that bear upon conduct in this area concern the amount being done already (either directly or indirectly), to assist people living in poverty overseas. With regard to the indirect contributions, there is a well-known propensity among citizens of affluent nations to greatly overestimate the amount that their governments spend on foreign aid. One recent study in the U.S. found that the median estimate for the percentage of the federal budget allocated to aid was 25%.¹⁹ In reality this figure is less than one percent.²⁰ Therefore, the level of assistance provided via tax revenue is extremely limited. As a percentage of national income, government spending on aid places the United States one place from bottom on the list of major donors, and Jeffrey Sachs has suggested the average American pays only \$4 each year to assist the world's poorest 600 million people.²¹

v. The Problem of Motivated Belief

Taken at face value, these beliefs about the world may appear to explain inaction in the face of extreme poverty. After all, concerns about the cost of doing more, combined with doubts about the efficacy of assistance, could lead affluent people to conclude that they are better off using their money in other ways. These people might also judge that they are already doing enough to fulfill their responsibilities to people living in poverty. Yet, there is reason to be skeptical about explanations of either kind.

Firstly, the reported beliefs discussed so far may or may not be those that affluent people truly hold: it is not always the case that what people believe, and what they say that they believe, are one and the same thing. Secondly, even if the beliefs are genuine, these putative explanations may *misrepresent* the role that they play in deliberation: rather than serving as premises, these beliefs may be affirmed after-the-fact in order to make judgments reached on independent grounds more palatable in some way. They would then be *motivated* rather than motivating beliefs. Beliefs that are adhered to in either way do not lead to the conduct that they are held by the agent to explain.

Furthermore, there is special reason to worry that this is true of many of the beliefs that have been discussed so far. Indeed, the decision not to assist people living

in extreme poverty has very bad consequences for those who go unaided. It is also the sort of thing to which blame could attach. The common desire, to avoid moral sanction, therefore provides non-acting agents with a weighty incentive to cast their conduct in a morally acceptable light. Given that the appropriateness of blame is usually determined by reference to the content of a person's beliefs, one way in which to achieve this effect is by misrepresenting what one knows or by denying knowledge of incriminating facts.²² Applying this insight to the present case, Stanley Cohen suggests that the need to be free from troubling recognition and guilt has led, in the West, to the emergence of 'cultures of denial'.²³

Is there any way to test these claims and get a clearer picture of the role played by false belief? One way in which to do so is to consider how affluent people respond to evidence that contradicts the things that they hold to be true. If these beliefs were genuine, then we would expect them to show an interest in new information and to modify their conduct accordingly. Yet, rarely is either expectation born out in practice. Among those who doubt the severity of extreme poverty and assert that 'a little goes a long way over there', few are interested in how poverty is measured. Furthermore, information about the true nature of these indicators rarely, if ever, prompts a radical re-evaluation of patterns of giving.²⁴ The same thing can be said of those who embrace deterministic theses about the causal drivers of poverty. We might expect these people to be relieved to discover that many of their own fatalistic beliefs are misguided, but this is rarely the case in practice. Finally, the same point can be made for those who point to corruption and waste as reasons for inaction, and also for those who claim that the amount already being done generates reasons not to do more.²⁵ As most aid agencies can attest, the reception of new information tends to be lukewarm at best.

No direct inference can be made from these observations to conclusions about the role that false beliefs do or do not play in deliberation. Indeed, it is possible that exposure to new information yields no change in conduct because old beliefs are not successfully displaced. On this point, Leif Wenar notes that the government departments and NGOs tasked with disseminating information about extreme poverty sometimes lack epistemic credibility in the eyes of the audience that they target.²⁶ Therefore, we need another way in which to assess the role of beliefs around which there is uncertainty. More precisely, we should think about whether we would

expect to see the conduct of affluent people in a counterfactual world where they held different beliefs from those that they currently report. Intuitions about this state of affairs can then be strengthened further by looking at survey data that explores the impact that different beliefs have on support for assistance at a general level.

Using this methodology, two things in particular stand out. Firstly, beliefs about the efficacy of aid organizations seem to be important: if people could be sure that their money would reach its intended destination then this would, in all likelihood, produce some change in how much they donate. Indeed, one study, which ranked trust in NGOs on a scale of one to four, found that a one point increase in levels of trust corresponded with a 57% increase in the likelihood that a person would favor the provision of additional aid to poor countries.²⁷ Secondly, beliefs about the personal cost of assistance seem to matter a great deal in this context: if individual donors really believed that the cost of assisting was trivial or non-existent then it is likely that their conduct would be different. And if they thought that assistance was in their own best interest, then they would probably do *far* more to assist people living poverty than is currently the case. Indeed, experimental studies provide some support for the latter conjecture, revealing a close relationship between perceptions of cost and rates of assistance.²⁸

Taken together, these considerations suggest that an explanation of inaction that focuses solely on false belief is likely to be incomplete. Beliefs about the cost and efficacy of assistance do exercise some influence upon deliberation. However, other claims are made in simply order to deflect criticism away from morally troubling behaviour. Ultimately, many people fail to provide assistance even though they know inside that extreme poverty is worse than they openly admit, that their capacity to provide assistance is more robust than they suppose, and that their own indirect contribution to poverty eradication is very small indeed. How to explain the conduct of this type of person, is the question that animates the remainder of this paper.

2. Beliefs About Value

When people decide how to act they do so on the basis of an understanding of the things that matter to them: beliefs about value, in conjunction with beliefs

about the world, feed into judgments about what to do. In the present context, inaction could be explained by the fact that affluent people do not value the lives of people living in extreme poverty, by the judgment that other personal goals are more important in this context, or by the belief that poor people around the world are responsible for their own plight. This section builds upon the account developed so far by looking more closely at the values that affluent people consciously endorse.

i. Anti-Humanism

When deciding whether to give money to aid organizations, individual donors need to decide whether the expected value of assistance outweighs the prospective cost of providing it. If they accord little or no value to human life in general, then even small personal sacrifices would appear to give them sufficient reason to act in other ways. One explanation of inaction holds that this is in fact the case: that wealthy people simply do not care about the death and suffering of impoverished people and that they subsequently accord little or no value to outcomes that improve their situation. While they may feel compelled by social pressure to pay lip-service to the moral ideal according to which every human life has value, this account holds that actual disregard for those living in poverty testifies to the presence of a powerful anti-humanist sentiment that lurks beneath everyday thought and practice

The anti-humanist thesis has a strong intellectual lineage, finding powerful expression in the work of both Nietzsche and Freud.²⁹ However, it is problematic for a number of reasons. To begin with, it requires us to believe something that many people find deeply counterintuitive, namely that we are not really concerned about the terrible suffering of other human beings, or that while we do care this attitude of concern is irrational because it tracks something that we believe we have no reason to care about at a deeper level. This is a serious dilemma. In focus group discussion, members of the public tend to express deep concern about the plight of those living in serious poverty. It also seems that this attitude of concern may be the *only* rational response to situations where the life and livelihood of others is seriously imperiled. Of course, we cannot take these impressions at face value. However, the anti-

humanist thesis also makes it difficult to explain a number of familiar forms of human interaction.

Most obviously if people do not accord value to human life in general, then it becomes difficult to account for altruistic behavior when it is directed towards those to whom we are not related. Indeed, while rates of private giving tend to be relatively low by historical standards, there is often a marked increase in contributions after catastrophic events such as an earthquake or tsunami.³⁰ This is something that the anti-humanist thesis cannot explain: if affluent people are not concerned about serious suffering or loss of life, then the scale or urgency of a humanitarian crisis should not be something that impacts upon their propensity to act.

Finally, the anti-humanist thesis makes it difficult to understand the character of more routine human relationships, such as friendship. In order to be secure, this type of relationship requires more than simply mutual affection. It also requires recognition that one's friend has independent standing as a person, and that this places limits on how we can behave in regard to him or her. On this point, Thomas Scanlon notes, that there would 'be something unnerving about a "friend" who would steal a kidney for you if you needed one. This is not just because you would feel guilty to the person whose kidney was stolen, but because of what it implies about the "friend's" view of your right to your own body parts: he won't steal them but that is only because he happens to like you.'³¹ Most friendships are not like this. Indeed, the idea that people have value, and that they warrant certain treatment in virtue of this fact, seems to be 'deeply woven throughout the fabric of human emotion and motivation.'³² Taken as a whole, these difficulties seem to show that the anti-humanist thesis should be rejected: it explains inaction only at the price of rendering unintelligible other salient patterns of human interaction.

ii. The Value of What We Possess

A more promising explanation of inaction involves a different set of value judgments: those that concern the cost of assistance to the agent in question. We have already seen that false factual beliefs lead many affluent people to think that they would forgo more by assisting than is likely to be the case. It is also possible that they

accord greater weight than is warranted to goods of this kind. More precisely, affluent people may accord primacy or near primacy to personal considerations when deciding what to do. If this is the case, then the cost of doing more will rarely seem trivial to them. In fact, the loss of even minor personal goods or opportunities might appear significant enough to outweigh the very large impersonal gains that could be achieved by acting in other ways. While some partiality in practical judgment is legitimate, the claim here is that the weight that the affluent accord to their own well-being exceeds these bounds.

In order to determine the plausibility of this second value-based explanation, we need to think more about the type of cost that wealthy individuals stand to incur by assisting. These costs are not usually relational (in the sense of being born by those whom they are related to). Many people, living in the Britain and the United States, could do a lot more to help those living in extreme poverty without damaging their relationships with loved ones, or doing less for compatriots than they do at present. Their affluence precludes this much.³³ Rather, the costs are personal in a more immediate sense. What they stand to lose out on, are certain commodities that they aspire to own or some part of their disposable income (which might not otherwise be spent at all). When deciding whether to assist it is these things that weigh in the balance of practical reason. They are good for the agent, but often only incrementally so. For explanatory purposes the salient question therefore concerns egoism not tribalism. We need to know what kind of premium affluent people put on the acquisition or retention of personal goods of this type.

The current explanation holds that people value personal possessions so highly that their pursuit appears to be justified, even when it results in serious suffering or loss of life for other human beings. Indeed, viewed through the lens of microeconomic theory, the fact that people *choose* luxury goods and commodities, over life-saving activities, may be said to reveal a preference for these things – one that could be anchored in value judgments of the kind under consideration. At the same time, it is difficult not to question the validity of this final inference. Considered intuitively, it is not at all obvious that wealthy individuals choose to spend money on a cinema ticket rather than on primary school education for a child *because* they believe that the former act contains greater expected value. At a conscious level, this kind of normative equivalence is something that very few

people endorse. Of course, they may be mistaken about their own underlying ascriptions of value. However, absent the valorization of wealth, or inclination to accord fantastic properties to material goods and possessions, it is far from clear that personal partiality extends as far as the putative explanation requires.

iii. The Undeserving Poor

A third explanation of inaction focuses on the role played by beliefs about fairness and desert. Common-sense morality holds that when beneficence is directed towards those who are responsible for their misfortune, or who deserve to be in the condition that they are in, the value of this action is diminished (or cancelled out altogether).³⁴ If affluent people believe that those living in extreme poverty are reckless, lazy or immoral, then it follows from this that the good of assistance could be significantly diminished in their eyes.

Nonetheless, this explanation encounters difficulties once we identify the precise conjunction of beliefs that are needed for it to hold true. In order for considerations of fairness or desert to have purchase, people must believe that a certain sort of relationship holds between those living in extreme poverty and their present condition. Causal responsibility is often necessary in this regard: it represents an important part of the claim that someone brought about his or her own misfortune. Yet it is not clear that people, living in Britain and the United States, believe that this condition is met in the case of world poverty. While they do tend to believe that the causes of poverty are endogenous to poor countries, survey data shows that most of the impediments that they identify are a product of the natural environment rather than human agency.³⁵ Furthermore, among the man-made obstacles that they do identify most are the product of elite malpractice: only rarely do they think that causal responsibility extends all the way down – and this simply cannot be true for the main victims of poverty namely children under the age of five.³⁶ Given that the problem is understood to arise because of bad governance, lack of education, and natural impediments to growth, the claim that poor people are responsible for their suffering is one that the affluent ought to reject.

Of course, beliefs about desert may still influence deliberation. For this to be the true, affluent people would simply have to ignore any incongruence between the

different things that they hold to be true. There is some evidence that this happens in practice. When discussing world poverty in focus groups, people often reveal tacit support for the view that the global distribution of wealth conforms to a natural moral hierarchy.³⁷ The tendency to blame victims of injustice, for their condition, is also consonant with a set of psychological tendencies commonly referred to as ‘just world thinking’.³⁸ Nonetheless, a study commissioned by the World Bank cautions against according considerations of this type too much explanatory weight. It found that people who agree with the statement that ‘others are poor because of laziness and lack of willpower’ are only 12 per cent less likely to support foreign aid overall.³⁹ Furthermore, we must note that correlation is not causation in this context: those who oppose foreign aid, on independent grounds, may be more likely to seek consolation in the thought that those living in poverty are undeserving of assistance.

This concludes our discussion of beliefs about value. Among those considered here, the inflated importance that people attach to their own wants and desires makes perhaps the greatest contribution towards an explanation of inaction. Beliefs about desert may also have a role to play. Indeed, when these factors are combined with the other species of false belief considered earlier on, they may lead affluent people to conclude that they have sufficient reason not help those living in extreme poverty after all. Yet, important doubts remain. To begin with, this explanation supposes widespread tacit adherence to claims about value that many people consciously reject. Beyond this, it appears possible to imagine a person who knows the facts about world poverty, who does not believe that those living in extreme poverty are responsible for their situation, and who does not adhere to heavily inflated notions of what she would forgo by assisting (or about the value of these things), but who *still* fails to provide meaningful assistance. Indeed, many of the people who read this article - being both conscientious and informed - will find themselves in this category. The fact that *these* people do not act generates pressure to explain inaction in other ways.

3. Deliberating About Options

When people deliberate about whether to assist, they do so in light of beliefs about the world and about value. Requirements of procedural rationality specify

further conditions under which these beliefs are correctly ordered or related to one another. As an aspect of practical reason, they regulate the process of deliberation by which people come to conclusions about what they have reason to do. While classical decision theory suggests that people will settle on the act that they believe has the greatest expected utility or value, findings from experimental psychology cast doubt on this claim. In practice, people rely heavily upon psychological heuristics and frames – devices that sometimes lead them to embrace judgments that are inconsistent with their own considered beliefs. This section looks at the possibility that wealthy people ignore the problem of world poverty altogether, are led astray by cognitive bias (when they do think about this matter), or reject the case for assistance on non-rational grounds.

i. Out of Sight, Out of Mind

It is sometimes said that affluent people simply do not *think* about world poverty, and that this omission explains their present conduct. Taken literally, this is unlikely to be true. As previously noted, the majority of people living in Britain and the United States are aware of this problem and accord it moral significance. What is true, however, is that most people rarely think about poverty, something that then makes its consequences easy to ignore. In general, as Michael Bratman notes, human beings are planning agents.⁴⁰ This means that, rather than considering each charity appeal on its merits, people tend to settle on the notion that a fixed amount is required of them and to adjust their conduct accordingly.⁴¹ As a result of this, failure to respond to a particular appeal can often be explained by the judgment that conduct is continuous with conclusions previously reached in this domain. What remains to be explained, however, is why, when they do think about the plight of people living in poor countries, wealthy individuals consistently settle on personal policies that require so little of them. The challenge is not to explain how affluent people think on a case-by-case basis but rather to explain this one systematic tendency for error.

ii. Heuristics and Bias, Part One: Salience

To make progress on this front, we can turn to recent work in experimental psychology. According to prospect theory (which aims to provide us with a realistic description of human decision-making), the choice between different options (or prospects) tends to proceed in two psychological stages: an editing phase and an evaluative phase.⁴² During the first phase, people simplify the options open to them by coding different outcomes in terms of gains and losses. Outcomes are most commonly coded relative to the agent's current asset position and gains and losses tend to resist aggregation. During the second stage of decision-making, people then evaluate the edited prospects and choose the one with the highest value. Here again prospect theory departs from the classical decision theory. The value of an option is not the sum of the value of its outcomes each weighed by its probability. Rather, the value of an option is determined, in part, by a set of highly contingent framing effects that bear upon its *subjective value*. This subjective value is the value that an option appears to have for an agent in a specific deliberative context. In addition to this, prospect theory suggests that the impact that beliefs about probability have on the value of an option is non-linear. In order to address this fact, it incorporates the idea that different probabilities have different *decision weights*.⁴³

These findings help to explain why affluent people do so little to help the global poor. To begin with, a central finding of prospect theory is that people are *loss-averse*. Experiments in this field reveal that the aversiveness or disvalue of a loss is almost always greater than the subjective value that person accords to a gain of the same size.⁴⁴ This, in turn, yields a status quo bias in deliberation and produces the 'endowment effect' whereby people are reluctant to part with what they already have even for prospective gains of greater size.⁴⁵ Given that potential donors must decide whether to incur an apparent loss in their current holdings, for the benefit of those living in extreme poverty, loss-aversion means that they will generally tend toward inaction.

In addition to this, the *identity* of the agent who will experience the loss or gain in question, influences the subjective weight that it is accorded in deliberation. Most obviously, gains and losses that accrue directly to the agent who is making the decision loom larger than those that accrue to other people. These self-regarding effects are more conspicuous. They are therefore accorded greater weight, something that remains true independent of any further beliefs that the agent has about the

importance of her own well-being relative to that of other people. Furthermore, when a decision does affect others, the precise nature of the recipient matters a great deal. If it is an individual person, then the outcome will tend to count for more than if an effect of the same size is dispersed over a group of people. Beyond this, the extent to which the agent *identifies* with the person or people in question also influences decision-making in this area. This is particularly clear in the case of those with whom we share an actual relationship: it is much easier to accord weight to the welfare of an acquaintance than to the welfare of a stranger. Yet this bias also affects people who we do not interact with and whom we may never meet. Indeed, if the people affected by a decision are socially distant, in the sense that they appear to be unlike the deliberating agent in important ways, then the impact that an outcome has on their welfare tends to be further discounted.⁴⁶ And if these people have no determinate identity – if they are, for example, recipients of aid that are yet to be chosen – then this makes it even easier to ignore the impact that our decisions have on them.⁴⁷ Taken together, these factors create what psychologists refer to as the ‘identifiable victim affect’: the phenomenon whereby people respond more vigorously to the plight of a single named individual than to the suffering of a much larger group of unknown people.⁴⁸

The way in which a person’s own *agency* is implicated in the production of outcomes also affects attributions of value in an important way. In the first instance, gains and losses that result from the agent’s own action tend to be accorded greater significance than those that are brought about by omission. Jon Elster terms this the ‘agency effect’.⁴⁹ Secondly, people tend to discount the gains or losses which result from their choices but which are distant from themselves. Commenting on this fact, Samuel Scheffler notes that, ‘we tend to experience our causal influence as inversely related to spatial and temporal distance... our influence on our local surroundings in the present and the near future tends, as we say, to seem more real to us.’⁵⁰ This may be, in part, due to the fact that near effects are much easier to observe. Thirdly, people tend to accord greater weight to effects that they bring about by themselves than to those that they bring about in conjunction with others. When an effect is brought about by a group of people, responsibility or credit for an outcome appears to disperse. In cases that involve a great number of people these effects are often, mistakenly, thought not to matter at all.

None of these ascriptive biases favor assistance. Most commonly, those who stand in need of help are unknown to affluent people. All that potential donors know is that their action (if successful) will benefit someone in need, who is probably in a distant land, and likely to be darker than themselves. The recipients of aid are therefore indeterminate and also physically and socially distant. Furthermore, the provision of assistance will be mediated through the activities of aid organizations: it will be affected in conjunction with the action of great many other people, and it will often have an impact that is more or less imperceptible to those who act. Donors will not usually know whom they have assisted or even if their contribution has helped anyone at all. In contrast to this, the losses that they stand to incur by giving money to aid organizations appear to be direct, unmediated and personal. Against this backdrop, the cost of doing more stands out in sharp relief.

iii. Heuristics and Bias, Part Two: Uncertainty

Deliberation about assistance is also vulnerable to error because it requires affluent people to deal with *uncertainty*. When thinking about how to act, they must decide whether to incur what seems like a certain loss for some probable gain. In practical deliberation, the decision weight accorded to a 'sure thing' greatly exceeds the weight that is assigned to outcomes that lack this probabilistic property.⁵¹ This effect then plays out differently in different contexts. People tend to be risk-averse when seeking gains: they prefer small but certain gains to prospects that are more risky but contain greater expected overall value. People also tend to be risk-seeking with regard to losses: they tend to prefer options that contain greater expected disvalue over ones that makes much smaller losses certain to occur. The latter bias, in particular, makes people unwilling to accept certain costs in cases where they may be able to do much more good by helping other people. Yet it is a mental calculus of this type upon which the decision to assist rests. Donating to aid organizations comes at a price and is understood to be part of risky venture. As a prospect, it is discounted in light of these considerations.

Importantly, the fact that people are disposed to think in this way remains true even when their considered beliefs support the conclusion that giving money to aid organizations is a risk worth taking and when the dictates of classical decision

theory suggest that it is a cost that they ought to incur. Faith in one's own capacity to help people living in extreme poverty will be shaken by cognitive bias of this kind. The same thing is true of judgments about subjective value. These biases influence decisions about assistance *even if* people do not believe that human life lacks value, that their own life is hugely more important than the life of other people, or that those living in extreme poverty are undeserving of assistance. Indeed, if there is a problem with the evaluation of prospects, then this remains true *regardless* of a person's deeper beliefs about morality and about value.

iv. Futility and Depletion Thinking

A final obstacle that people encounter when deliberating about world poverty stems from the common tendency to endorse mistaken patterns of inference. One kind of inferential error that people make in this context is 'futility thinking'.⁵² Someone who approaches the issue in this way sees those living in poverty, first and foremost, as members of a hopelessly overwhelming group. Confronted with death and suffering on such a massive scale, they conclude that it is not something that any single person can hope to do something about: whatever they do, millions of people will still go unaided. Following on from this, they then embrace the further conclusion that (because they cannot address the problem in its entirety) any action is futile and hence not worth the effort. But this simply does not follow. Obviously, people cannot be asked to do what is impossible. However, wealthy individuals *are* able to help individual people living in poverty and prevent very serious harm from befalling them. Therefore, this is an action that needs to be considered on its own merits. In this context, it is the drop in the ocean that matters.

A second form of inferential error reverses the logic of futility thinking. In cases of what I term 'depletion thinking', the agent begins by debating whether to provide assistance to those living in extreme poverty in a single case, and concludes that she has good *prima facie* reason to act. However, it then occurs to her that, no matter what she does now, there are likely to be many more cases like this one and that *simple consistency* would require her also to assist in further cases of this type. Therefore, a new concern arises: namely that if the initial action were iterated many times over, she would be left hopelessly depleted and unable to pursue her own

projects or relationships. Given that this outcome is something that she has strong reason to avoid, she then reasons backwards from this conclusion and decides that she must also have sufficient reason (mysterious though it remains) not to provide assistance in the first place.

The error displayed by depletion thinking, is not with the initial judgment, but rather with the understanding of the further conclusions that it commits one to holding. What consistency requires, in this case, is that the person assist in subsequent cases *only to the extent* that they resemble the first. And, while the level of need is likely to remain constant, only rarely will it be true that there are two situations in which the choice facing the agent is exactly the same. If she incurs a cost by assisting, then each time she responds positively to a request for help her stock of resources will fall and the cost of repeating this action in the future will rise by a commensurate amount. When this cost is sufficiently great she will then gain a moral permission to act in other ways. However, this point will be well short of the serious depletion that was previously considered. Indeed, the belief that one ought not to bankrupt oneself may also entail believing that one should not forgo *equivalent* goods in order to help people who are dying from hunger and disease, but it tells us little about a situation in which the cost of doing more is minor or non-existent.

Taken together, there is reason to believe that these psychological factors play an important role in explaining widespread failure to help people living in extreme poverty today. This is because their influence is both general and robust. Unlike explanations that stress the role of false empirical beliefs, there can be little doubt that these factors exert a genuine influence upon deliberation. And unlike those that emphasize the role played by substantive beliefs about value, behavior that is consistent with deliberative bias and error can be observed across a wide spectrum of human behavior. Taken in conjunction with the temptation to slide into futility or depletion thinking, these considerations suggest that wealthy people are reluctant to part with what they already have, and that they are especially reluctant to incur immediate personal losses for the sake of risky gains that would accrue to a distant mass of unknown people. Taken together, these biases and assumptions lead most people to conclude that they have sufficient reason not to assist people living in

extreme poverty – even when they recognize that the moral case for doing so is compelling.

4. Motivational Problems

The condition of *akrasia* or ‘weakness of will’ is only poorly understood. While some people doubt the reality of this phenomenon altogether, those who defend it argue that it is possible for a person to reach the conclusion that one course of action – for example giving to charity – is best overall and then not form the intention to do it.⁵³ This section asks whether *akrasia* might explain widespread failure to assist people living in extreme poverty today. The claim that it does so represents an interesting alternative to the account developed so far: it fits well with the fact that conduct in this area is generally resistant to introspection and also finds widespread support among many people who do not assist.

i. Against *Akrasia*

Before we evaluate this claim in full, it is important to be clear about what *akrasia* is not. Firstly, *akrasia* is not ‘moral weakness’. It does not involve doing something that one believes to be morally wrong for non-moral personal reasons. Secondly, *akrasia* is not compulsion. A person is not *akratic* if she is incapacitated by addiction or strong emotion. Thirdly, *akrasia* is not momentary error of judgment. People are not *akratic* if an option appears best to them, in the heat of the moment, and they then do something that is inconsistent with their own more considered judgments. What the *akratic* person fails to do is form the intention to act on the basis of her all-things-considered judgment about what the best course of action is. In the present case, the claim is that affluent people believe they have most reason to help people living in extreme poverty but then simply fail to do it.

This diagnosis can be challenged on a number of grounds. To begin with, it risks engaging in buck-passing. The claim that people are *akratic* explains one pattern of behavior only by invoking another phenomenon that is poorly understood. Indeed, even those who defend *akrasia* are unclear about why it occurs and how it might come about. The appeal to *akrasia* also runs into problems once we

take a closer look at what it entails. To help things along in this regard, we should imagine the case of a person who intentionally takes a glass of wine even though she knows that she ought not do so because she will then be unable to drive home safely. Her deliberation is not impeded. She does not think, even in the moment, that the hedonic benefit gained by drinking makes this option the best. Nor is she the victim of a compulsive desire to drink. Nor does she think that it is only morally wrong or imprudent to act in this way. Rather, this person knowingly takes the drink contrary to her all-things-considered judgment about what it is best to do.⁵⁴ She is akratic or weak-willed.

How does her behavior compare to the conduct of wealthy people who fail to provide assistance to those living in poverty? I believe that the fit is a poor one. Firstly, it seems likely that a person's inclination to act in this manner varies according to their strength of character. While one person might accept a drink under these conditions another person would be more resolute and refuse to do so.⁵⁵ However, failure to help people living in extreme poverty is a near *ubiquitous* feature of modern life. Therefore, it seems unlikely that only those with an inconstant disposition behave in this way.

Secondly, even among those who do have this disposition, akratic behaviour is not the norm: it is an anomalous, but not wholly foreign, aspect of their conduct. More generally, a person may suspect that they are vulnerable to this form of rational error without knowing when exactly her conduct will deviate in this way.⁵⁶ In contrast to this, inaction on the part of affluent people is both predictable and *stable over time*. To explain this fact, it would have to be true that whenever wealthy people think about doing more for those living in extreme poverty akrasia intervenes and prevents them from doing so. Yet this is also hard to understand. In general, widespread and stable conduct of this kind, is symptomatic not of akrasia but rather of judgment based upon reasons (as they appear to those with whose conduct we are concerned).

Finally, the condition of akrasia is usually thought to be amenable to correction through conscious reasoning or to containment by pre-commitment devices.⁵⁷ In the case of charitable contributions, affluent people have the option of setting up standing order with their bank, so that the money is transferred regularly and they are able to resist akratic tendencies that are *ex hypothesi* awakened by more

direct appeals. However, the vast majority of people do not do this either. Of course, it remains possible that they are also incapacitated by akrasia when it comes to signing the order with their bank. However, this would show that there is nothing *ad hoc* about the behavior in question. Rather, it consistently maps onto certain features of the situation in the same way that we expect judgment based on reasons to do so. Taken together, these difficulties tell strongly against an akrasia-based account of inaction.

ii. The Preference for Akrasia

Nonetheless, many people who do not assist continue to believe that their own behavior *is* explained by a phenomenon of this kind. I believe that the appeal of akrasia, in this regard, stems both from a general tendency to misdiagnose their own conduct in this area and also from the fact that people have reason to prefer this explanation. Taking these points in turn, we should note that among those who claim to be akratic, many are concerned that their own failure to help people living in extreme poverty is morally wrongful. Beyond this, at the level of phenomenology, acting wrongly can seem very similar to akrasia: it sits in tension with the belief that one is a morally decent person in much the same way that akrasia strikes at the notion that one is a rational human being. In both cases, the person *feels* like their action is at odds with an important part of the self. Therefore, it is easy to get these things confused. Secondly, it is far better from an evaluative standpoint to be akratic than it is to be morally weak. Confronted with the death and suffering on such a serious scale, it is less damning to claim that some strange contortion of practical reason interferes and stops us from acting than it is to admit that we act wrongly in the cool light of day. The appeal to akrasia, while mistaken, therefore serves to deflect feelings of guilt and blame.

5. Conclusion

Most accounts of practical reason hold that people who are rational and informed will do what they have most reason to do. If we accept that affluent people often have decisive reason to assist those living in extreme poverty, then their

widespread failure to do more points to the existence of rational error or false belief on a serious scale. In order to explain inaction under these conditions, this paper has focused on three kinds of obstacle in particular: false empirical beliefs, mistaken beliefs about value, and deliberative error. More precisely, it has shown that people living in Britain and the United States continue to harbor doubts about the efficacy of assistance, to inflate the personal costs associated with this course of action, and to deliberate about global issues in a way that is riddled with bias, distortion and error. Crucially, the insights provided by prospect theory help to explain why potential individual donors are reluctant to incur small personal losses for the sake of large possible gains that would accrue to a distant mass of unknown people (particularly when this action would be brought about in conjunction with others).

It follows from this compound explanation, that affluent people are not necessarily disingenuous when they express concern for those living in extreme poverty overseas. Rather, deliberative bias and faulty reasoning prevent them from reaching practical conclusions that are consistent with the values that they affirm. These obstacles are difficult to perceive clearly because they feature routinely in practical deliberation. Indeed, they often lead to sound judgments being made. However, in the case of world poverty, these same considerations lead people to believe that they have good personal reasons to ignore the death and suffering of others when this is not the case.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, many people who deliberate in this manner continue to be concerned that their conduct is morally wrong. For this reason, they adhere to moralizing accounts of their own behaviour and advance explanatory theses (such as the claim about *akrasia*) that have no explanatory power.

¹ In the United Kingdom, less than 10% of people report having made a donation to organizations that provide aid 'for people in poor countries' in the past six months (TNS, *Public Attitudes Towards Development*, (TNS Report prepared for COI on behalf of the Department for International Development, Spring 2010), pp. 19, 12). According to the OECD, people living in the United States currently contribute around 7 cents to overseas aid and

development for every \$100 of income earned (cited in Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: Doing Your Part in Ending World Poverty* (London: Picador, 2010), p. 24). Meanwhile, a study undertaken by the Centre for Global Prosperity, which defines personal contributions in a more expansive way, concludes that private philanthropy directed toward these goals amounts to \$12 billion each year (Patricia Miller, *The Index of Global Philanthropy and Remittances 2011* (Centre for Global Prosperity: The Hudson Institute, 2011), pp. 9, 12). If this figure is correct, then the average personal contribution of each U.S. citizen to 'global causes' is around \$50 per annum. This is about one-thousandth of their annual income.

² Christine Korsgaard, 'Skepticism about practical reason', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 83/1 (1986), p.11; Derek Parfit, 'Reasons and motivation,' *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, 71,1 (1997): 199-130; Joseph Raz, *From Normativity to Responsibility*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 26-35.

³ There is also considerable evidence that affluent people stand to benefit themselves from altruistic action. Given that they have already invested heavily in other sources of well-being, the 'warm glow' effect and sense of meaning that result from other-regarding activity often make this the best thing to do from a purely prudential point of view (Lalin Anik, Lara Aknin, Michael Norton, and Elizabeth Dunn, 'Feeling good about giving: the benefits (and costs) of self-interested charitable behavior', in Daniel Oppenheimer and Christopher Olivola (ed.) *The Science of Giving: Experimental Approaches to the Study of Charity*. (New York: Psychology Press, 2011), pp. 6-9; Michal Strahilevitz, 'A model of the value of giving to others compared to the value of having more for oneself: implications for fundraisers seeking to maximize donor satisfaction', in Oppenheimer and Olivola, *The Science of Giving*, pp. 15-32).

⁴ TNS, *Public Attitudes*, p. 21.

⁵ Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), *Americans on Foreign Aid and World Hunger: A Study of U.S. Public Attitudes* (2001), p. 4.

⁶ On this point, Jamie Mayerfeld writes that 'what so often passes for 'suffering', for want of a richer vocabulary or clearer powers of discernment, in the experience of people who enjoy a firm material and psychological foundation in their lives, is not genuine suffering and can only be called so by the most distant and strained analogy.' Jamie Mayerfeld, *Suffering and Moral Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.46.

⁷ When asked about priorities for government spending in the international arena the British public identified poverty alleviation as *the most important issue*. When rankings were adjusted to include domestic goals and priorities international poverty alleviation fell behind spending on health and education but was deemed more important than spending on the police, national defense or social services (TNS, *Public Attitudes*, pp. 16-17).

⁸ When asked about the causes of poverty 18% of the British public mentioned overpopulation and birth control as an issue. Few of these people would endorse the stronger neo-Malthusian claim outlined above (*ibid.*, p. 23).

⁹ In response to the question 'What do you think are the main causes of poverty in poor countries?' 56% cited corrupt leaders and governments, 23% cited lack of adequate education, 18% cited overpopulation and lack of birth control, 15% cite natural disasters, 14% cited war and conflict and 10% cited international debt (*ibid.*).

¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 25, 28.

¹¹ When asked to estimate what percentage of US aid money that goes to poor countries ends up in the pockets of corrupt government officials there the median estimate was 50% and the mean estimate was 53.8% (PIPA 2001 *op cit.*, pp. 14, 11).

¹² The latter concern is somewhat ameliorated in the case of non-government organizations (NGOs): U.S. respondents suggest that reputable NGOs were two or three times more likely than government bodies to deliver aid successfully, and people in the U.K. give these organizations vastly more credit than government counterparts for work that is being done in poor countries. Admittedly, the overall efficacy of NGOs was still not thought to be very high. In the U.S., the median estimate for how much aid gets through to people who really need it was 10% and the mean was 23%. These figures rose to 30% and 37% respectively

when money goes through NGOs (ibid., pp. 6-7). For British figures see TNS, *Public Attitudes*, p. 32.

¹³ These claims are made by OXFAM, UNICEF, and Doctors Without Borders respectively. See <https://www.oxfam.org.uk/donate/>, <http://www.unicef.org.uk/Donate/Donate-Now/> and http://supportus.msf.org.uk/support_donate (accessed 12.01.12).

¹⁴ Leaf Van Boven and Thomas Gilovich, 'To do or to have? That is the question', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 85,6 (2003): 1193-1202; Elizabeth Dunn, Daniel Gilbert and Timothy Wilson, 'If money doesn't make you happy, then you probably aren't spending it right', *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 21,2 (2011): 115-125.

¹⁵ See footnote 3.

¹⁶ One recent study found that subjects primed to think about money were considerably less generous when rendering assistance to those in need than people who had not been influenced in this way (Kathleen Vohs, Nicole Mead, and Miranda Goode, 'The Psychological Consequences of Money,' *Science* 314, (2006), pp. 1154-56). Financial cues may serve to direct attention towards the cost of assisting and away from the non-financial good that would result from this action.

¹⁷ Alois Stutzer, 'The Role of Income Aspirations in Individual Happiness,' *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 54 (2003): 89-109

¹⁸ See Daniel Kahneman, Alan Krueger, David Schkade, Norbert Schwarz & Arthur Stone, 'Would You Be Happier If You Were Richer? A Focusing Illusion', *Science* 312 (2006): 1908-1910; Lara Aknin, Michael Norton & Elizabeth Dunn, 'From wealth to well-being? Money matters, but less than people think,' *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 4 (2009): 523-527.

¹⁹ This figure rose to a staggering 45% among those without a high school diploma (WorldPublicOpinion.org/Knowledge Network, *American Public Opinion on Foreign Aid*, November 30th 2010, p.1).

²⁰ Furthermore, only part of this allocation is need-based; aid is more often used to service political and economic ends. Alberto Alesina and David Dollar, 'Who Gives Foreign Aid to Whom and Why?' *Journal of Economic Growth*, March 2000, 5, 1, pp. 33-63.

²¹ The United States spent 0.16% of its Gross National Income (GNI) on overseas development aid in the period 2000-09. This is less than the 21 other countries who have their aid allocation monitored by the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC). Only South Korea performed worse (0.07%) than the United States in this regard. The relevant figure for the United Kingdom is 0.4%. This places it in joint tenth place among donor states (OECD, *Development Co-operation Report 2011: 50th Anniversary Edition* (OECD Publishing, 2011): p. 229). Sachs is quoted in Paul Krugman, 'Delusions of Generosity,' *New York Times*, July 19 (2000), p. A29.

²² The blame that attaches to a person who is ignorant, but who should of known better, is different and typically less severe than the blame that attaches to the person who knows better and still acts wrongly.

²³ According to Cohen, denial has become the norm, rather than being part of an aberrant state of affairs (Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001, Ch.11).

²⁴ I have myself attempted to explain the PPP adjustment mechanism to many non-acting affluent people over the past decade. The response to information of this type is invariably underwhelming.

²⁵ Commenting on these beliefs one author concludes that, 'it may be that the public partly use corruption as a post-hoc justification for their almost instinctive reluctance to get engaged in global policy issues, to justify their inherent reluctance to donate their money' (Andrew Darnton, *The Public, DFID and Support for Development - A Rapid Review* (1st December 2009), p.16). Finally, with regard to estimates regarding the percentage of the federal budget spent on foreign aid Steven Kull notes that, 'it is quite extraordinary that this extreme overestimation has persisted for so many years, even among those with higher education'

(<http://worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brunitedstatescanadara/670.php?lb=bt&pn=670&nid=&id> accessed 14.01.12).

²⁶ Leif Wenar, 'Poverty is no pond: challenges for the affluent' in *Giving Well: The Ethics of Philanthropy* (eds.) Patricia Illingworth, Thomas Pogge, Leif Wenar, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 104-132.

²⁷ Note this is only a correlation, causal inference cannot be made (Pamela Paxton and Stephan Knack, 'Individual and Country-Level Factors Affecting Support for Foreign Aid,' *Policy Research Working Paper 4714* (World Bank, Sept 2008), pp. 10, 15.

²⁸ One famous study looked at rates of assistance among those who encountered someone in difficulty while on the way to class. Among those who were already late for the seminar only 10% stopped to assist, 45% of people who were on time stopped to assist and 63% of those who had time to spare provided assistance (Darley, John M., and C. Daniel Batson, "'From Jerusalem to Jericho": A study of situational and dispositional variables in helping behaviour,' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 27,1 (1973): 100-108).

²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2002).

³⁰ Paul Slovic, "'If I look at the mass I will never act": psychic numbing and genocide', *Judgment and Decision Making* 2,2 (2007), p. 88.

³¹ Thomas Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1998), p. 165.

³² Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 68-9.

³³ Affluence, and perhaps also good fortune.

³⁴ Shelly Kagan, 'The additive fallacy', *Ethics* 99, 1 (1988), p. 19.

³⁵ This distinction is only a matter of degree. For example, the damage done by natural disasters is significantly affected by the planning and response mechanisms that are in place.

³⁶ The media reinforce this view. While the majority of articles (56.2%) make no reference to the causes of poverty, among those that do venture an opinion 25.9% cite domestic or national level factors as causes, 17% cite global and structural issues, and less than 1% attribute poverty to individual behaviour or attitudes (Jennifer van Heerde and David Hudson, "'The righteous considereth the cause of the poor?" Public Attitudes Towards Poverty in Developing Countries', *Political Studies* 58,3 (2010), p.395).

³⁷ Andrew Darnton and Martin Kirk, *Finding Frames: New Ways to Engage the UK Public in Global Poverty* (London: Bond, 2011), pp. 86, 90-92.

³⁸ Carolyn L. Hafer and Laurent Begue, 'Experimental research on just-world theory: problems, developments, and future challenges', *Psychological Bulletin* 131,1 (2005): 128-167.

³⁹ Paxton and Knack, 'Factors Affective Support for Foreign Aid', p. 14.

⁴⁰ Michael Bratman, *Intentions, Plans and Practical Reason* (London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 2-3.

⁴¹ Among those who reported giving money to charities in the U.K. 69% reported donating the same amount as they did six months ago (TNS, *Public Attitudes*, p. 20).

⁴² Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, 'Prospect theory: an analysis of decision under risk,' in Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (ed.) *Choices, Values and Frames* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 28.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴⁵ Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, 'Choices, values and frames,' in Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (ed.) *Choices, Values and Frames* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000b), pp. 13-14.

⁴⁶ Peter Unger, *Living High, Letting Die: Our Illusions of Innocence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 35; Lichtenberg, Judith (2004), 'Absence and the unfond heart: why people are giving less than they might be', in Dean K. Chatterjee (ed.) *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 86-87.

- ⁴⁷ Deborah A. Small and George Loewenstein, 'Helping the victim or helping a victim: altruism and identifiability', *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty* 26,1 (2003): 5-16
- ⁴⁸ Karen Jenni and George Loewenstein, 'Explaining the identifiable victim effect', *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*, 14/3 (1997): 235-257; Tehila Kogut and Ilana Ritov, 'The "identified victim" effect: an identified group, or just a single individual?', *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, 18/3 (2005): 157-167.
- ⁴⁹ Jon Elster, 'The Valmont effect: the warm-glow theory of philanthropy', in Patricia Illingworth, Thomas Pogge and Leif Wenar (ed.) *Giving Well: The Ethics of Philanthropy*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 73, 75-76.
- ⁵⁰ Samuel Scheffler, *Boundaries and Allegiances: Problems of Justice and Responsibility in Liberal Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, second edition, 2001), p. 39; italics mine.
- ⁵¹ Kahneman and Tversky, 'Prospect Theory', pp. 2-3.
- ⁵² I take this term from Peter Unger (Unger, *Living High*, p.63).
- ⁵³ In one famous passage Donald Davidson asks, 'does it never happen that I have an unclouded, unwavering judgment that my action is not for the best, all things considered, and yet where no action I perform has a hint of compulsion or the compulsive? There is no proving that such actions exist but it seems to me absolutely certain that they do' (Donald Davidson, 'How is weakness of the will possible?' *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, second edition, 2001), p.29).
- ⁵⁴ This example is a modified version of the one provided by Gary Watson in 'Skepticism about weakness of will', *Philosophical Review* 86, 3 (1977), p. 324.
- ⁵⁵ This fact might also cast last on the propensity of some people find the existence of akrasia self-evident while others cannot comprehend it at all; for those who are not akratic we would expect the condition to remain a mystery.
- ⁵⁶ Akrasia violates the *enkrasia* requirement of practical reason (John Broome, *Rationality Through Reasoning* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 95).
- ⁵⁷ Broome, *Rationality*, pp. 288-291; Jon Elster, *Explaining Human Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 232-244.
- ⁵⁸ Interestingly, NGOs working to address poverty have come to a similar conclusion, albeit through a process of trial-an-error. They have found that the most effective approaches to fund-raising and mobilization tend to stress identifiability, empathy, and directness, in order to overcome the psychological obstacles discussed in this paper (Martin Kirk, "Beyond Charity: Helping NGOs Lead a Transformative New Public Discourse on Global Poverty and Social Justice," *Ethics & International Affairs*, vol. 26/2 (2012), pp. 248-250).