

Testing the motivational impact of moral arguments concerning global poverty

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Abstract

If one assumes that the unnecessary suffering of millions of people is something bad that should be avoided if possible, it is not hard to argue that ours is an unjust world. The evidence speaks for itself. While hunger is the mayor cause of death in the world (Ziegler, 2006) every year, individuals in Europe and the US spend roughly twice as much money in perfumes and food for pets than that which would be necessary to cover nutritional and health care demands around the globe (Verdú, 2003). Alleviating global poverty is thus one of the most pressing challenges the world faces.

Two kinds of arguments are commonly used within philosophy to try to convince people to fulfil their moral duties towards the worst-off. The first kind of argument appeals to positive duties. Peter Singer has famously argued that if it's in our hands to avoid something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of (comparable) moral importance, we are bound to do it (Singer 1972). The second kind of argument appeals to negative duties. Thomas Pogge has argued that, as a result of a violent history, uncompensated exclusion from global resources, and the sharing of an unfair institutional order, affluent countries have a negative duty to repair the damage done unto poor countries (Pogge 2001).

Although both types of argument aim to convince people into action, their effectiveness in motivating individuals to alleviate global suffering has not been empirically tested. This research project aims at empirically testing and comparing the motivational impact of both kinds of arguments. To address this objective, the results of analytical enquiry—through moral and political philosophy—(Part I) will be combined with two types of empirical methodologies that contribute to moral psychology: social sciences surveys (Part II), and neuroscience (Part III).

Outline

Part I. The origin and nature of the duty to assist

- I. Global poverty: the facts
- II. Arguments for a duty to relieve global poverty
 - a. Peter Singer's arguments concerning positive duties
 - b. Thomas Pogge's arguments concerning negative duties

Part II. Assessing and comparing the social impact of moral arguments

- a. Moral arguments and moral motivation
- b. Survey: Which kind of argument is more effective? (e.g. half of research subjects are given one argument, half the other, and both groups are asked whether they are willing to donate money to relieve world poverty and how much. There can be follow-ups after some months to assess whether the arguments prompted long-term attitudes and behaviours)
 - i. Capacity to change attitudes
 - ii. Capacity to change behaviours
- c. Do gender, age, religious belief, level of education, profession and political affiliation influence the likelihood of each type of argument having an impact in individuals' motivation?

Part III. Assessing and comparing the impact of moral arguments in cognition and emotion

- a. The role of reasoning and emotions in moral motivation
- b. Empirical study in collaboration with neuroscience lab: How do both kinds of arguments (appealing to positive or negative duties) impact cognition and emotional processes in the brain?
 - i. What kinds of emotions and thought processes are prompted by the arguments?
 - a. What is the relationship between these emotions and moral motivation?
 - i. Is guilt an important factor in moral motivation?
 - b. Which kind of argument engages attention more effectively?
 - c. What kinds of variations could enhance the motivating power of arguments? (E.g. Are graphic examples more effective than abstract ones? Are video clips more effective than written arguments?)

Part IV. Conclusions