Ethics, Globalization and Hunger:  
An Ethicist’s Perspective

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1. Introduction

While the poor have always been with us, and while hunger is a companion to poverty, our globalizing civilization is witnessing unprecedented disparities of excessive wealth and massive starvation. We know that half the world’s population (mostly Asians) are living on one or two dollars a day, while the middle classes of affluent nations enjoy standards of living that feature – and increasingly revolve around – orgiastic hedonism and consumerism, some of it at the expense of the poorest nations.

Globalization has bought much success to many. Among its fruits are instantaneous mobile data exchange and allied information technologies, shrinkage of space-time via the internet; rapid movement of goods and services mediated by complex transportation and communication infrastructures; the transcendence of transnational economic forces over local and even national political ones; emancipation and increasing participation of women and minorities across the spectrum of cultural arenas; an emergent global elite whose members pledge allegiance to planetary management and proudly consider themselves (with some justification) as “citizens of the world.”

But on the other side of the digital and global divide, in developing nations as well as in failed states, billions of human beings are caught in dire poverty traps with little or no hope of extricating themselves, or their children, unaided. Ironically, many forms of so-called “aid” serve only to exacerbate their suffering. To be sure, the globalized rich are not solely responsible for the plight of the marginalized poor: endemic political and commercial corruption, outdated land and property laws, repressive cultural and religious traditions, lack of fundamental education and health care – all these things combine to disenfranchise, impoverish and starve hundreds of millions of unfortunate souls.

To make matters worse, agricultural subsidies in affluent nations (primarily the USA and the EU) enable the dumping of artificially cheapened produce onto developing markets, effectively shutting out and bankrupting indigenous food producers. This has the secondary effect of driving masses of destitute farmers and their families from their lands, and into appalling shantytown slums surrounding large urban centers, where they and their children will suffer every conceivable misery known to man, with no little or hope of improving their lot in life. This is the hideous underbelly of globalization.
But since our planet has shrunk so much, at least for those with the means to traverse it, and is so highly networked by IT and multi-media coverage, at least for those with the privilege of access, it is impossible to deny or to remain in blissful ignorance of the large-scale human sufferings not solely caused, but partly perpetuated, by the affluence of the globalizers. Moreover, it is primarily the affluent who can offer the means of alleviating crushing poverty. Everyone who benefits from globalization must become aware of the sufferings of those who are marginalized by it; and everyone who is possessed even of the remotest human sensibility cannot remain morally insensate in the face of so much privation.

World-leaders and other key decision makers have responded in various ways, which include espousing “Millennium Development Goals” intended to cut poverty in half by the year 2015. Although some of these goals are being achieved while others are not, even their attainment can backfire in unfortunate ways which worsen poverty for smaller numbers while alleviating it for larger ones. Thus the poor are often pitted against one another in a cruel struggle for survival, a Hobbesian state of economic nature, whose “victors” are vaulted across the poverty line into the lower middle classes, with new hope for themselves and reasonable optimism for their children; but whose “vanquished” sink even deeper into the abyss of utter destitution, an economic black hole from which escape seems impossible.

Economists appear to have developed articulate and accurate models of the complex dynamics of global hunger and its alleviation, on both macro- and micro-scales, and are able to propose various remedies to key decision-makers. As social scientists, economists study phenomena such as poverty and hunger in reasonably objective and dispassionate ways. As moral human beings, however, they cannot countenance much of what they have learned in process of such study. Just as medical researchers must approach epidemiology and pathology of diseases as objectively as possible for the sake of good science, yet as moral beings may be profoundly moved by what they learn in the context of human suffering imposed by disease (especially where avertable); so economists of good conscience cannot remain silent in the wake of their discoveries concerning the causes and effects of widespread global hunger.
Given that their economic prescriptions must therefore be alloyed with normative ethics, it is only reasonable that economists of conscience would seek to join forces with moral philosophers – applied ethicists and religionists – who perhaps can help to locate economic prescriptions in moral frameworks, or ground them in ethical theories. There is enough food in the world to sustain everyone; what is lacking is apparently (to revert to a well-worn “buzzword”) the political will to redistribute existing resources more equitably, and to implement policies that would both institutionalize such redistribution and inculcate sustainable dynamics of poverty reduction alongside those of wealth creation. Beyond this, perhaps we need to awaken a moral will among the affluent.

This paper will endeavor to provide some foundational underpinnings to the undertaking of such a task. Like my economist colleagues, I honor dispassionate value-neutrality as a desirable perspective from which to assess existing conditions, causes and remedies; but am likewise committed to compassionate moral outrage at the deliberate perpetuation of so much human suffering in the world, by forces that wield sufficient might (if insufficient will) to ameliorate the unconscionable horrors of mass-deprivation and starvation, in the midst of such plenty.

2. Non-Human Populations and Moral Anti-Naturalism

In the interests of introducing ethics where they are most appropriate, I adopt from the outset a position known to philosophers as “moral anti-naturalism.” This position asserts that the natural world, exclusive of humans, embodies no moral properties, and that ascriptions of moral agency, at least on this planet, begin with and apply primarily to human beings. While broader views, such as Jainism and Buddhism, extend the doctrine of non-harm (ahimsa) to all sentient creatures, such views are exclusively human in their origins, even though other life-forms become their beneficiaries. (Contemporary reformulations of such views, like those espoused by Singer, repose on a different metaphysic.) But the ascription of moral agency, and the fundamental “right to life” that it entails, regardless of the scope of its beneficence, is a uniquely human invention. There are no ethics in the natural world, and no non-human animal’s behaviors can cogently attract the attributes “moral” or “immoral.” Nature is
amoral to a fault; only humans are capable of imposing (or failing to impose) morality upon themselves.

The biological phenomena of appetite for food, and its satiation, stem from thermodynamic considerations. Life is improbable if not anomalous, in that it embodies and sustains negative entropy. While this appears to contradict the second law of thermodynamics, if viewed statistically then life is merely a local, hence permissible, fluctuation. An ineluctable condition of sustaining negative entropy is the ingestion and digestion of more simple life-forms by more complex ones. This is otherwise termed “the food chain.”

Schrödinger was possibly the first to observe that a living organism must feed upon negative entropy, and the essence of metabolism is to free the organism from the (positive) entropy it produces while alive.¹ Specifically, this means that some living matter must deprive other living matter of life in order to live itself. Beyond a certain level of complexity, to be alive entails feeding on other life, sucking order out of the environment and returning disorder to it. This is Darwin's struggle for existence. It is essentially a temporary but ultimately futile resistance against entropy. Standard links in the food chain typically include many varieties of predator-prey relations, modelled mathematically by the Lotke-Volterra equations. These are non-linear but essentially sinusoidal fluctuations of interdependent populations. (see figure 1).

figure 1. Lotke-Volterra equations

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¹. Schrödinger, 1948, p.72.
The first two of Darwin's five tenets, which implicate such populations in our context, may be summarized as follows:\textsuperscript{2}

(1) A struggle for life ensues from an over-abundance of reproducing life-forms competing for resources insufficient to sustain them all (from Malthus).

(2) Of many individuals born, only a small number can survive the struggle long enough to reproduce (from observation).

The rediscovery of Mendel's work, and the introduction of the concept of mutation (by de Vries) and gene (by Johannsen) heralded the birth of neo-Darwinism, in which Darwin's brilliant hypothesis of tenet (4) became richly substantiated. But attempts to extend Darwinian and neo-Darwinian paradigms to the human species (e.g. Herbert Spencer's social Darwinism, Raymond Cattell's eugenics, E.O. Wilson's socio-biology) have been hotly-contested, and appear woefully inadequate to the task of accounting for human cultural evolution. Darwin himself had refused Marx's invitation to write the Foreword to Das Kapital, and had asserted to Marx that his (Darwin's) theories pertained only to vegetable and animal kingdoms, and not to political ones.

At the risk of belabouring the point, we make no moral judgements about Darwin's second tenet. Indeed, we understand that Nature devised or evolved a "lottery" to which the progeny of innumerable species are compelled to subscribe. No moral philosopher bemoans the fates of millions of hatchlings whose "premature" deaths sustain the larger food chain, nor praises the "virtues" of the select few who survive long enough to reproduce. Even periodic mass extinctions of species (as in the Jurassic and Late Cretaceous periods) evoke awe without moralization.; after all, 95% of all species that ever existed are extinct. We may lament the loss of biodiversity, but such judgement is grounded either in scientific or (at most) aesthetic regret. We erect no monuments to

\textsuperscript{2} His other main tenets are: (3) A continuous graduation of physical variations between individuals exists, both within \textit{and} between species (from observation \textit{and} by hypothesis, respectively); (4) A particular variation, however slight, may be beneficial or detrimental to an individual's survival, relative to its competitors in a given environment. Such variations are inherited by the offspring; they arise, and are transmitted, in some manner internal to the individual (by hypothesis); (5) The principle "by which each slight variation, if useful, is preserved" is called Natural Selection (by definition).
commemorate irreversible passing into oblivion of so many life-forms, nor do we indict Nature for “crimes against animality.”

However, the current biological debacle on planet Earth cannot unfold without attracting moral condemnation, for it is the exclusive handiwork (and latest foolishness) of *Homo sapiens*. Owing predominantly to the manifold pressures of unchecked human population growth, to which corporate greed and political expediency are but willing handmaidens, humans are well-embarked in both the de-speciation and despoilment of the planet, on extravagant scales. This represents the dark side of globalization. Large-scale human hunger is to some extent a byproduct of an even larger catastrophe, and it is difficult to deplore the part without condemning the whole.

In stark contrast to the Lotke-Volterra equations, the human population curve increases exponentially over time, while natural resources are similarly depleted. Synthetic resources are manufactured or husbanded, but their supply or provision both lags demand and lacks sufficiency. This is depicted in figure 2. Billions of people now subsist in poverty and hunger, in the gap between the red and blue curves, and in the region above the black curve. There are insufficient natural resources to sustain them, and insufficient provision of synthetic resources to sustain them.

![Figure 2. Human population dynamics](image)

Before tackling the ethical dimensions of this man- and woman-made disaster, let us ask: What faculties has nature bequeathed to other social predators, to prevent them from over-exploiting or mal-distributing their food resources to the point of hunger, starvation or extinction? Owing to the insightful work of Wynne-Edwards, we find a ready
reply, which is rooted in territorial imperative. By substituting a parcel of land (or a volume of sea, or air) for the resources it contains, and by establishing an optimal population density for a given species in that territory, nature sets the boundary conditions for an unstable but tenable homeostasis. If the actual population density strays too far from the so-called “optimum number” (for that species in the given habitat), social behaviours change radically to enable the necessary increase or decrease in numbers, and subsequent regression toward the optimum homeostatic mean.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group type</th>
<th>Typical number</th>
<th>Typical area (sq. miles)</th>
<th>Optimum Density</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ant formicary</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>20,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gibbon family</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>baboon troop</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gorilla troop</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>human band</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wolf pack</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. Typical natural optimum densities

Figure 3 depicts some typical optimum numbers of social animals. Note that in a state of nature, hunting-and-gathering bands of humans maintain roughly the same order of magnitude of population density as wolves. This represents the limits of nature’s decree for our population control. Had we remained within them, terrestrial human population would be not much more than that of wolves and other pack animals. Boasting no masses, we would know no mass starvation either.

Viewed from a neo-Darwinian standpoint alone (thus contrary to Darwin’s own prescription about the inapplicability of his thesis to “political kingdoms”), man’s survival
from his earliest days to the present was, and remains, a precarious affair. He is born an abjectly dependent animal, with an immature nervous system that requires years to develop fully; a defenceless body that protracts juvenility even after years of constant care; and a big brain that requires decades of intensive enculturation to function even at minimal capacity. What is the prognosis for such a creature’s survival? By any lights, it is not good. In fact, the fossil record shows that the large primate brain is natural selection’s most dubious gambit to date: the bigger the brain, the shorter the life-expectancy of the species. Yet this pathetic biped sapiens has somehow managed to become the planet’s top predator, preying not only on every life form extant (directly or indirectly), and not only on the biosphere itself (e.g. from oceans to oilfields to ozone), but also and most notoriously on his own kind. Political, religious, commercial, social and sexual predation abound in the human world by default. Morality is a weak and ineffectual brake on human predation.

And therein lies our secret of “success,” such as it is. In order not only to survive, but also to emerge as the scourge of earth’s life-nurturing habitat, the feeble and helpless human neonate is vouchsafed a terrible gift: From the first instant to the last, we are self-regarding, short-sighted and rapacious predators. Congenitally weaponless, man has no instinctive checks upon the use of any weapons evolved extra-somatically by his big brain: including commercial predation and economic exploitation of his own kind.

In sum, moral codes are tacked on by cultural evolution, as toothless afterthoughts in the teeth of the realization of our terrible predicament. There is nothing in human nature that compels any binding universal morality. Their conceptions of “good” are mostly congruent with their appetites for power and pleasure, and they form alliances only for the purpose of furthering their own ends. In the absence of an overarching power to keep them all in awe, they will prey on each other incessantly. Nothing save human predilection for fantasy (bequeathed no doubt to grant us respite from our real condition) falsifies this Hobbesian picture.

3. Human Populations and the Foundations of Ethics

Although nature almost certainly intended that humans should subsist in small hunting-and gathering bands, and pose no dire threat to any species except perhaps themselves, humans have outwitted nature (temporarily) by learning how to sustain
relatively permanent and highly populous settlements. This began in earnest during the Neolithic revolution, which pioneered both domestication of animals and seasonal agriculture, as well as tools and weapons necessary for the construction and defense (against less industrious human marauders) of permanent settlements. Thus the Neolithic revolution also marked the conceptualization of goods and chattels, the concomitant replacement of spirituality with materialism, and the outset of man’s separation from nature.

Ongoing invention of tools (e.g. wells and ploughs) and elaboration of symbolic structures (e.g. tribal myths and legends) afforded both the technological means and the traditional binding forces necessary for the sustenance of increasingly large populations. Since unchecked population lies near the heart of both matters (global hunger and planetary despoilment), it is useful to compare human population densities in a “state of nature” with those sustained by global infrastructures and allied technologies. Figures 4 and 5 show the results of a mere 14,000 years of cultural evolution – which on biological time scales is negligible, but which has nonetheless transformed our species, the planet, and all the natural by-products of eons of geological and biological evolution.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Microstate</th>
<th>Pop.</th>
<th>Area (sq. mi.)</th>
<th>Density</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liechtenstein</td>
<td>34,000</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>548</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Marino</td>
<td>24,000</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbados</td>
<td>180,000</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>1,084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuvalu</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1,333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malta</td>
<td>400,000</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>3,278</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4. Typical microstate population densities
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metropolis</th>
<th>Population / sq. mi.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>10,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>17,333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>25,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>34,132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mumbai</td>
<td>41,984</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5. Typical metropolitan population densities

The sustenance of current microstate and metropolitan population densities entails the maintenance and evolution of increasingly complex, multi-layered and fragile networks of technologies dedicated to the production and delivery of goods and services on massive and historically unprecedented scales. Since the gap between the developed and the developing world has widened in some key respects, and is partly maintained by forces resistant to change, it is increasingly difficult for the least-networked populations to interact with the most-networked ones. Cycles of affluence and cycles of poverty become decoupled; and bimodal distributions of wealth result, which serve only to reinforce the disparities. In terms of food consumption, we see epidemic proportions of obesity at one extreme in the developed world, contrasted with pervasive and severe hunger at the other extreme in the developing world. While over-consumption of fat- and sugar-laden victuals is a serious problem, symptomatic of a spiritual void that can never be filled (only expanded) by a disposable and instantaneous culture predicated on continuous overdoses of junk goods, junk services and junk thought, this is at once the lesser of two evils and a contributing cause to the greater evil. That greater evil is acute mass starvation, in contrast with chronic spiritual starvation.

Why do I call human suffering an evil? I am far from alone in doing so, and my reasons may not be the same as those of many others who utilize such highly-charged nomenclature. Yet the fact we do this at all, for whatever reasons, is philosophically
significant. The human being, alone among myriad other fauna of this earth, is uniquely capable of rendering moral judgments.

Cuckoldry is named after the cuckoo, but this bird is not branded as “immoral” for having evolved such deceit as its signature survival strategy. The origins of human cuckoldry, among a repertoire of duplicitous behaviors, are observable in chimpanzees and other apes – our closest living relatives. Yet these animals have neither fashioned nor vitiated any moral codes. These complementary moral capacities – nobility and turpitude – reside exclusively within the province of humanity.

While emergent political and social norms (alongside vestiges of sociobiological ones) undoubtedly shaped the ethos of hunting and gathering bands, the transition to permanent settlements – and their inhabitants’ conceptualizations of property and all its ramifications – was decisive in the cultural evolution of moral codes. It is no accident that the oldest writings of antiquity (the written tradition representing a cultural breakthrough in the preservation and transmission of symbolic structures) are infused with moral discourse. Nor for that matter is it an accident that all the great world religions share a common core of moral precepts: Among the most ancient sources of axiological guidance, organized religions developed manuals of moral “best practices”, devised by shepherds to help maintain and increase their human flocks, but debased or disregarded by human wolves who prey on them.

To speak of “the village” (the kind it takes to rear a child) is to conjure images of pastoral charm, natural simplicity, and moral decency. One of the last communities to achieve celebrity for philosophical and literary works emanating from such an ethos were the New England Idealists. Nowadays, Emerson’s celebration of “Self Reliance” and Thoreau’s sojourn on Walden Pond are relics of a bygone age; a scant century and a half in the historical past, but separated from our present by the gulf of globalization, in which virtuality and technology displace mere chronology. The villages of yesteryear were knitted by the spirit of community. Such villages have all but vanished, transformed out of recognition in the developed world by successive waves of progress: the Industrial Revolution, utilitarian and democratic reforms, the Golden Age of capitalism, the information revolution, the postmodern exurban sprawl. Community is superseded by technology, and moral consciousness is eroded by technocracy.
In his forthright 1905 rebuttal of social Darwinism, Peter Kropotkin wrote:

And while in a savage land, among the Hottentots, it would be scandalous to eat without having loudly called out thrice whether there is not somebody wanting to share the food, all that a respectable citizen has to do now is to pay the poor tax and to let the starving starve.

Kropotkin’s critique bears substantial weight today, save that our taxes are paid to a more complex array of inefficient, unaccountable and technocratic governments, while more people than ever starve.

In New York City, the quintessential urban jungle cum central hub of the global village, yet hardly a savage land – at least to all appearances on Fifth Avenue – the Hottentot custom is all but impossible to practice. Ride the subway system, and you will regularly observe the following succession of events. First, a charity worker enters the subway car with a hamper of sandwiches, fruits, and beverages, announces his or her mission, and asks whether anyone is hungry or thirsty. There are no takers, so he moves on to the next car. Second, and before long, a beggar enters the car and recites a compulsory tale of woe, often hyperbolically exaggerated because of fierce competition (even in this sector) – e.g. “I am homeless, jobless, HIV-positive, and was shot trying to steal food.” There are no givers, so he or she moves on to the next car. In ten years of riding the New York subway, I have never seen the food donor and the food seeker in the same car at the same time. Apparently, they have evolved a pattern of perfect mutual avoidance. If the Manhattan chapter of the global village can finesse the Hottentot maxim so deftly, imagine how many more people, across much greater distances, it can also fail to feed.

The inapplicability of the maxim of the Hottentot village to the global village becomes starker in the context of the logic of Emmanuel Levinas’ “other-centered” ethics. Levinas argues that the very existence of others imposes inescapable moral obligations on us all. He asserts that “justice remains justice only, in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off, but in which there also remains the impossibility of passing by the closest.” To those who sustain virtual selves
in that unbounded e-Commons known as cyberspace, the former distinctions of time and space “between those close and those far off” no longer apply. In principle, any two people anywhere on the planet can communicate instantaneously. But in reality, for instance in the New York subway, there remains a probability approaching certainty of “passing by the closest,” especially while speaking on a mobile phone to “those far off.” And if one can so easily “pass by the closest,” then one can even more easily forget the existence of billions of “those far off” who have never used phones or e-mail, and who are just as hungry as “the closest” whom everyone passes by. Levinas would (and did) conclude that such a system is utterly unjust, and that in consequence it is accumulating an incalculable moral debt. The question is: Who will pay?

Moral precepts form no part of the corpus of natural laws (i.e. physical, chemical, biological), and cannot be consistently or coherently grounded in social sciences either (pace regnant but naïve and patently falsifiable “paradigms” like Kohlberg’s). Religions have attempted to ordain moral codes as the imperatives of their respective deities; secular philosophers, to ground goodness in universal human contexts; postmodernists, to relativize or deconstruct ethics altogether. It appears that no-one can reliably compel anyone to behave morally or immorally, because no-one can compel another’s choice (that is, cannot curtail another’s rapacity). Collectively we determine what is customary, whereas individually we can follow or flout custom as we list. Since morals are only customs in the purloined garb of laws, it is empathically moving but empirically dubious to appeal to morality as the slayer of hunger’s dragon. Television networks long ago inculcated and then discovered “compassion fatigue” among their viewers: Too many starving human beings portrayed too graphically for too long does not stimulate prolonged charitable response; it promotes rapid channel-change.

Hume’s notorious “fork” is no dining utensil; rather, a stake in the heart of hopes that moral appeal alone can be decisive in motivating the alleviation of global hunger. For Hume saw most clearly the divide in kind that obtains and persists between matters of fact (that which “is”) and matters of value (that which “ought to be”). He showed that there is no valid inference from the former to the latter, that is from factual premises to normative conclusions, unless one smuggles at least one normative premise into the argument. In Hume’s words:
“In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark’d, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary ways of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz’d to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, ’tis necessary that it shou’d be observ’d and explain’d; and at the same time that a reason should be given; for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it.”

To illustrate Hume’s sharp point with a blunt example, suppose we state the factual premise that millions of children are going to bed hungry tonight. What normative conclusion one validly draws from this depends vitally upon what normative premise one smuggles into the argument. Thus the following argument is valid:

P1: Millions of children are going to bed hungry.
P2: No child should go to bed hungry.
C: Therefore we should find a way to feed millions of children.

However, changing the normative premise can also change the conclusion radically, and still preserve deductive validity:

P1: Millions of children are going to bed hungry.
P2: No child should be conceived by parents who cannot feed it adequately.
C: Therefore millions of children should not have been conceived.

Many affluent people doubtless withhold help owing to variants of the foregoing argument, which is inhumanly callous yet deductively valid. Even if we wish to assert a
universal humanism, with a premise that suffering is wrong, and that wrong should be remedied, we will encounter difficulties. For example:

P1. Human suffering is wrong.
P2. Wrongs should be remedied.
P3. Millions of people are suffering from hunger.
C. Therefore hunger should be remedied.

I take this to be the central argument of our workshop, on which there is accord among participants, and for which considerable other support could be garnered. However, if we sharpen our focus on P2, so that it reads “A wrong should be remedied by those responsible for the wrongdoing,” then to preserve validity we must modify the conclusion: “Therefore hunger should be remedied by those responsible for its manifestation and persistence.” But here I detect less consensus among workshop participants, on the critical matter of exactly who are the responsible agents.

If we agree that agricultural subsidies in America and the EU are partly responsible, then it would follow that they should be reduced or eliminated. But who is responsible for that? Policy makers and trade negotiators are appointed by whom? By politicians beholden to agro-business lobbyists? If so, then the voting public is ultimately responsible for demanding necessary changes, and media is responsible for bringing these matters to public attention. Then again, millions of poverty-stricken Indians live in areas that experience some of the world’s highest rainfalls during monsoons; yet in the dry season clean water has to be trucked in, and purchased by them for 7 rupees the liter. India also has the atomic bomb: Hence one might suppose its engineers more than capable of building reservoirs, cisterns, and irrigation systems. That the Indian government does not undertake such public works is clearly not the fault of millions of obese Americans; nor is it their fault that millions of thirsty but superstitious Indians believe that spells and charms induce the monsoons. India is the world’s most populous democracy; its own people and government must be partly accountable for its social ills. Yet it is clear that democratic political process, governed by short-term interest in re-
election, is too myopically self-regarding to effect the necessary changes. And it is also clear that “media responsibility” is an oxymoron of the first order.

Thus a refusal to be impaled on Hume’s fork requires a very careful assessment not only of where responsibility for hunger lies, but also of how it can be meaningfully shouldered. And unlike alleged facts, which are themselves notoriously susceptible to challenge (not only by wholesome skeptics but also by fulsome revisionists and other anti-realists), value-judgments are even more subject to dispute. It is a corollary of Hume’s fork that normative premises themselves do not result from any pristine deduction from fact, and must emanate from yet other normatives held more primitively to be true. Even among those most ardently committed to alleviating global hunger, there is bound to be disagreement on which set of normative claims (if any) will be adopted as fundamental.

4. Which Normative Ethics Are Viable?

As mentioned earlier, economists are seeking viable ethical models in which to frame or ground their suggested remedies to hunger. I believe this a worthwhile endeavor, because the public is much more vulnerable to moral suasion than are their political and business leaders. Public opinion qua consumer sentiment can play a critical role in overcoming political inertia and corporate indifference alike. Economists tend to see four main “families” of ethics as contenders for such models: deontology, teleology, virtue ethics, and correlative ethics. Let me comment on some strengths and weaknesses of each.

**Deontology:** This is rule-based morality, epitomized by the Ten Commandments in Judaeo-Christian tradition and the Eight-Fold Way in Buddhism. An action is deemed to be “right” in so far as it conforms to a rule; rules being accorded the moral status of “good” by default. Deontological justice is therefore attained by mass-conformity to regnant dicti, which has a tolerable record in some secular systems but which is historically inimical to human progress in both totalitarian and theocratic contexts.

The main advantage of deontology is that it provides a “rule book” that can be consulted, in principle, to determine whether a contemplated action is “right” or “wrong.” The main weakness is that there is no consensus about resolving inevitable exceptions to
the rules. For example, most religious moralities as well as secular criminal codes contain prohibitions on killing, but quarrels over exceptions to this rule can turn lethal themselves – as in the assassination of abortion-performing physicians by “right-to-life” radicals. There is no universal human consensus about the boundaries of the rule either: Jains and Buddhists teach “ahimsa,” or non-harm toward all sentient (or even living) beings; whereas Christians preach brotherly love but also torture and slaughter animals for mass-consumption, rearing and force-feeding them under deplorable and ghastly conditions.

In human terms, deontologists also struggle with the moral distinction between killing and letting die, which is played out in the ongoing and sometimes vituperative debate between proponents and opponents of passive euthanasia, but which also has implications for global hunger. For if it is deontologically impermissible to kill humans to put them out of their “misery” (which most ethicists assert) but not impermissible to let them die in the interests of preserving their autonomy and dignity when heroic medical interventions are of dubious merit and would only prolong suffering (which many ethicists assert), then the danger of transposing this argument to poverty- and hunger-stricken populations is plain. Swift’s “Modest Proposal” may be ironically well-named and even tame, if one considers the possibility that some deontologists might sanction the “letting die” of large populations as the best way to alleviate their suffering and – with inhumane absurdity – to preserve their human dignity. The movie “Soylent Green” is a chilling but eminently foreseeable possible future, and there are ethicists who would endorse it. Thus economists should not look to deontology as the arbiter of global hunger.

In so far as economists identify with secular social science, they may wish to subsume deontology under its celebrated Kantian head. The categorical imperatives, however, are named rather optimistically by Kant, for they compel no-one who wills to disregard them. Although Kant’s attempt to ground morality in a rational framework is perhaps the most objective and noble in the history of western philosophy, his maxim binds no-one who is unwilling to be bound by it: unlike Newton’s laws, among other natural dictates, which have unconditional claim on our assent (i.e. which operate whether we avow them or not).

**Teleology.** This is outcome-based morality. Formally, an act is defined as “right” just in case it produces a balance of good over ill (“act-utilitarianism”); or defined as
“right” if performed in accordance with a rule which, if generally followed, would produce a balance of good over ill (“rule-utilitarianism”). The vernacular slogan was coined by Priestly, but is usually misattributed to Bentham: “The greatest good for the greatest number.” Although utilitarianism is the best-known form of consequentialism, and was elevated to the status of a credible system of ethics by Bentham and his protégé, J.S. Mill, it is afflicted with at three least formidable problems, which detract from the theory’s universal appeal and applicability.

First, as von Neumann and Morgenstern pointed out in the introduction to their *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, it is impossible to maximize two variables of a given function simultaneously. Thus “the greatest good for the greatest number” defies our calculus. We can maximize some good, without being able to guarantee its uniform distribution; or we can maximize the number of recipients of some good, without being able to guarantee its greatness.

Second, if anything is clear after 2,500 years of philosophical debate, it is the non-existence and probable non-attainability of a consensus on the meaning of “good.” Thus the measurement of any good, and in particular of the greatest good, remain contentious matters, likely to beg as many moral questions as they intend to resolve.

Third, a standard criticism of consequentialist ethics in general, and of utilitarianism in particular, is that they fail to take individual rights into account. Indeed, to those who place primary importance on the universality of human rights, utilitarian measures can appear downright immoral. Bent on satisfying the inflamed passions of the greatest number, lynch mobs are utilitarian assemblies, but hardly exponents of justice. On a grander scale, utopian revolutions are thought to be utilitarian, in the sense of the end presumably justifying the means. But such ratiocinations are fallacious: Ends and means are never independent. Although good can come of ill, ill is not a precondition of goodness. This is a central moral problem that troubles economists, who know for example that we could within a short time feed 90% of the world’s starving people. This would be utilitarian, but would also condemn millions of people to death. Doing the “greatest good for the greatest number” too often entails doing the “greatest harm to smallest number.” Utilitarianism is susceptible to intolerable inegalitarianism.
Utilitarian models tend work well in the medical sphere, from triage to phase one clinical trials. But this is because some people are dying of injury or illness in any case, and by acknowledging this strategically we can save many other lives. Since injury and illness are inevitable despite our best efforts at prevention, utilitarian criteria seem self-justifying in such contexts. But since there is evidence that our best efforts have not been made to alleviate hunger, and moreover that hunger should not be inevitable, utilitarian criteria are less acceptable in this context.

Even from this cursory glance, it is clear that utilitarian ethics are not readily compatible with either rules-based or rights-based systems. Any maxim might be adopted or eschewed in favor of some end, which is anathema to Kantian deontology; while by its very definition, utilitarianism shrinks from a universal (and therefore equal) assertion of human rights.

**Virtue Ethics.** This ancient and venerable tradition emerged in three different versions, in three great civilizations. Aristotle, Buddha and Confucius form the “ABCs” of virtue ethics, and their prescriptions are worth heeding. Each of these sages taught that goodness neither inheres in rules, nor obtains as a function of outcomes; rather, is a product of the practice of virtues. The classical Hellenic virtues are courage, temperance, justice, and wisdom; to Aristotle, their practice conduces to a good life, his *summum bonum*. Buddha’s list is encompassed by the Eightfold Path: Right View and Right Intention (the province of wisdom); Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood (the province of ethical conduct); Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration (the province of mental development).³ Buddha’s theory and practice is intended to awaken human beings from their deep delusions concerning the nature of self and reality, and raise them to the full potential of their benevolent and compassionate sentience. Confucius is less systematic, but his influence in Asia is even more pervasive than is Aristotle’s in the West. Confucius taught that the inculcation and practice of virtues is essential to the balance of the individual, the harmony of the family, and the stability of the state. The five traditional Confucian virtues are humaneness, righteousness, proper deportment, wisdom, and trustworthiness.

Virtue ethics are optimistic, and in their conception of the human nature tend to avoid both religious and political extremes. In rebuttal of conservative views, they conceive the human being neither as a congenitally sinful animal (qua Augustine), nor as an irremediably egoistic predator (qua Hobbes); rather as a being that can acquire sinful habits and rehearse egoistic dispositions if unchecked by virtue itself. In rebuttal of liberal views, they conceive the human character neither as a blank slate upon which anything may be imprinted (qua Locke), nor as a noble savage corrupted by civilization (qua Rousseau); rather as a partially malleable being who nonetheless admits of some “hard-wired” traits, ingrained tendencies and individual idiosyncrasies.

Are there immediate applications of virtue ethics to the problem of hunger? Yes. Let us briefly state one relevant insight from each of the three sages.

Aristotle claimed that a prosperous middle class is essential to a stable state, and this squares with economists’ visions of more normally-distributed income curves replacing the bimodal or saw-tooth distributions that signal excessive disparities between ultra-poor and ultra-affluent. Indeed, the countries in which hunger is most prevalent are also those with the weakest middle classes. So perhaps Aristotle’s *Politics* and *Ethics* should be gleaned more closely for advice. Aristotle’s “Golden Mean” represents a moderate and balanced course in all matters, one charted to avoid extremes – including massive poverty and starvation.

Buddha similarly counsels avoidance of both excess and dearth, and cultivation of “the Middle Way.” The practice of Buddhism as a secular philosophy (not necessarily as a religion) awakens compassion, and with it the mission to help all suffering beings wherever possible. In a very practical sense, some Buddhist precepts, if widely adopted, would make for significant reductions in food consumption (among other things) in more affluent nations. The problem of how to translate such putative voluntary reduction into a zero-sum game, such that those who need to consume more could benefit from others consuming less, remains to be solved. Nonetheless, the operative Buddhist maxim – that two-thirds of what one normally consumes is more than sufficient for sustenance – could reduce food consumption (and obesity, and allied problems) significantly in the developed world, and possibly potentiate increased consumption where it is most urgently needed.
Confucian ethics are also vitally important in his context, although they are at odds with Aristotle and Buddha in certain key respects. In all human societies, there is a constant tension between the claims of the individual on the group, and of the group on the individual. Although individual claims have been considerably furthered in the past century or so, mostly as a consequence of unprecedented dialogues on human rights, the significance of the individual was hardly neglected by ethicists of antiquity. Aristotle’s ethics are aimed at leading a fulfilled life, and though fulfillment is by definition an individual matter, it is a developmental process that requires supportive social milieus. Similarly, Buddha’s goal of awakening also pertains to the individual, although it cannot be accomplished in the absence of compassion for and from others – hence Buddhism’s “Three Jewels” are Buddha (the potentially awakened one dormant in us all), Dharma (the teachings that conduce to awakening) and Sangha (the community that fosters such teachings). Thus, for Aristotle and Buddha alike, individual development is synonymous with human progress. Confucius differs in the greater weight that he accords to social structures, and to the subordination of the individual to the collective at decisive junctures, in the interests of social stability.

In particular, Confucian ethics recognizes a natural authoritarian hierarchy that springs from Tao (the Way), and which is transposable to the human world. In this natural hierarchy, the emperor (i.e. the state) governs subject; husband governs wife; mother governs child. The reciprocity of Chinese metaphysics recognizes that the child needs and desires to be subordinate to the mother; that wife needs and desires to be subordinate to the husband; and that the citizen needs and desires to be subordinate to political authority. The West has corrupted and reversed this natural order with an excessive focus on individualism, which has undermined the common good to an irreversible and irreparable extent, heralding the ongoing decline and collapse of Western civilization itself.

Confucius asserts that only by acquiescing in our dutiful roles in the natural order of things can we become fully realized as human beings. It is remarkable that, in China and to an extent in Japan (which regards China as the “parent” culture), the Confucian ethos has prevailed across centuries, surviving wars of dynastic succession, colonialism, communist revolution, cultural revolution, democratization, and now globalization.
Moreover, combining the organizational advantages of Confucianism with the developmental potential of capitalistic markets is propelling China to the forefront of global economies.

China is also the first nation to restrict human reproduction as a matter of state policy, in an effort to reduce absolute numbers and thus to mitigate the boundary conditions that drive mass hunger. Only in a Confucian ethos, which entails the subordination of individualism to the larger interests of the collective, could one witness such historical trumping of biological claims by cultural ones. Sexual reproduction is a ubiquitous biological capacity, but not therefore a universal human right. Virtue ethics perennially raises the questions: Which virtues shall be inculcated in the populace, and why?

**Correlative Ethics**. This is a genuinely new branch of moral discourse, a recent function of the Enlightenment project and its cognate evolution of human liberties. A salient and pragmatic correlation obtains between rights and duties, because declarations of universal human entitlements do not automatically create or sustain the conditions required for their exercise. In particular, human rights cannot be exercised in a vacuum; their exercise always entails the fulfillment of correlative obligations (or duties) on the parts of citizens and organizations alike.

A further distinction is normally drawn between “positive” and “negative” rights. A positive right is such that its exercise entails a correlative obligation to provide something; for example, a right to vote cannot be exercised unless candidates and ballots are provided. A negative right is such that its exercise entails a correlative obligation not to interfere; for example, a right to freedom of expression cannot be exercised except in the absence of censorship. While most people wish to be the beneficiaries of rights, not all wish to fulfill their correlative obligations. This reconstitutes but does not resolve the fundamental tension between individual claims on society, versus societal claims on the individual.

But the language of human rights has become so distorted in the West, and public “rights-consciousness” so pervasive owing partly to unremitting media oversimplification and partly to political indoctrination in the universities, that many Americans (in particular) inhabit a sublime estate, in which they believe they have rights to everything
and obligations to nothing. The distinction between right and privilege has been so conflated, whether innocently or intentionally, that rights are broadly misconstrued as laws of nature that somehow should be operative without individual intervention, social cost, or political process. Combined with the postmodern affinity for “empowerment” – a euphemism for relinquishing power to groups, so that individuals unable to claim or exercise it on their own merits can do so via membership in a newly-privileged collective of “victims” entitled to “compensation” for the past – the emergence of “group rights” (a dangerous oxymoron) has made an ironic mockery of the hard-won individual entitlements that form its very foundation.

The brief history of human rights belies such naïve views. Every entitlement hitherto bestowed on humanity has had to be won and maintained by individual intervention, at social cost, and via political process. Those tempted to suppose that rights provide a panacea for the world’s ills might think twice, in light of the discrepancy between a right’s assertion (which is easy) and its exercise (which can prove difficult or impossible). While the harp of human idealism is soothingly strummed by noble declarations of universal human rights, such as emanate from the precincts of the United Nations, the ears of idealists and realists alike are still pained by cries of human anguish, such as emanate from too many of the nations that glibly espouse but remorselessly violate of said entitlements. Idealists clamor for “peace and love;” realists reply that peace and love alone could never have de-Nazified Germany, democratized Japan, nor liberated Eastern Europe from the yoke of Soviet totalitarianism.

Even the American Bill of Rights, as laudable a moral document as Homo politicus has ever seen fit to ratify and implement, does not accord to anyone a right to food, clothing, shelter, or employment. It merely implies the provision of conditions such that an average person might reasonably suppose, all things being equal in theory but never in practice, that he or she has a decent prospect of securing the necessities of life, and beyond these some luxuries of livelihood, by dint of personal industry and by virtue of political climate. Comprehensive health care, quality education and judicial remedy are not rights in America; one generally gets what one can afford of these, and their price is steep.
The social democracies can, with some justification, claim to have done better than the American Republic in terms of correlative ethics. Social democracies provide the necessities of life as rights, minimally (if all else fails) in the form of a social safety net through whose meshes relatively few citizens slip. However, social democracies operate at a correlative cost: Taxes are graduated to favor a more normal distribution of income, and base taxation rates are sufficiently high (at least by US standards) to subsidize the impecunious, so that the vast majority lives above the poverty line. At the same time, economists realize full-well that a nexus of boundary conditions enabled the emergence of these quasi-utopian (but sometimes clandestinely totalitarian) “nanny states,” a nexus which for a variety of reasons is neither extant nor envisageable in the hungriest parts of the world. Sub-Saharan African and South Asian states are not likely to replicate the political economies of Canada, Denmark, Norway and Sweden any time soon.

Moreover, even a cursory glance at the normative list of MDGs, compared with the appalling facts on the ground in so many signatory nations, compels a shift from idealistic espousals of rights to realistic observations of oppression. Correlative ethics has the smallest purchase in the places which most need it. The most brazen violators of human rights are among the most enthusiastic signatories of human rights conventions. The UN itself is a global incubator of acrimony, factionalism, bureaucracy and hypocrisy. Its collective aspirations for humanity are noble to a fault, but the dehumanizing practices of some of its member-states are debased beyond belief.

So while the language of rights may represent some of humanity’s best hopes, it also highlights our worst despair. Do human beings have a “right” to be born? That question is hardly settled, and co-exists in perpetual tension with woman’s emergent right to abortion on demand. Are humans really born free and equal? This reads like Rousseau’s most sophomoric wishful thinking. In fact, human are born enslaved to their congenital dependencies, to their genes, to their geographies, to their languages, to their cultures, to their religions, to their political economies, and to all the inane prejudices that their parents, teachers and peers will assiduously and relentlessly instill in them.

Moreover, all human are born unequal, both to one another and with respect to their own changing states. Individuals differ widely in natural ability and interest; and differ too in acquired expertise and habit. They may be conceived of as “equal” in various
abstract senses: e.g. theologically (as children of one God); teleologically (as awakening Buddhas); judicially (as equal before the law); constitutionally (as deserving of equal rights); humanistically (as entitled to equal opportunity). But natural and acquired inequalities assure that every theoretical, hypothetical and ideological conception of humanity – no matter how egalitarian – will be falsified by experience of massive and pervasive inequality in practice. So again, the burning question is not whether and according to which criteria we regard people as hypothetically equal; but whether humanity finds ways to constrain the extreme and debilitating inequalities of income and opportunity that cause so much suffering and privation.

Nobody is born free; everybody is born unequal. If high-minded declarations of human rights embody too much wishful thinking or well-intended fantasy at the outset, they may prevent us from confronting facts in ways that could make a difference.

5. What Should We Do?

Globalization is a dynamic phenomenon that depends on evolving and shifting alliances between multinational and transnational business interests on the one hand, and regional, national and local political interests on the other. The process is also driven by technological innovation, social entrepreneurship, and creative leadership. At its best, globalization denotes a new consciousness of humanity as a whole: interconnected inhabitants of a single village. In the most salutary sense, planetary managers work daily in a formerly mystical space: Teilhard de Chardin’s noesis, a “thinking envelope of Earth.” But in the most pejorative sense, globalization is a euphemism for economic feudalism of a kind that engendered the worst horrors of the Industrial Revolution, but on an incomprehensibly larger scale. The gross inequities and grotesque iniquities against which Dickens, Marx and Mill railed so vociferously in Britain are being repainted on vastly larger canvases throughout the contemporary world.

Pure commercial interests, motivated solely by profit, unchecked by humanitarian concerns, and abetted by entrenched corruption, will always produce inequities; while democratic political interests, motivated mainly by short-term popularity, unable to confront long-term issues, and condemned to ineffectual compromise, will always sustain inequities. At the same time, erosion of public trust in received corporate and political
institutions, driven by evidence of unparalleled avarice and ineradicable corruption, along with bewildering complexities of postmodernist technocracy, are driving millions of marginalized and disenfranchised souls into the dogmatic arms of proselytizing and often mutually-incompatible fundamentalist religions, notably Islam and Christianity, in their most virulently intolerant forms.

Many things need to be done to alleviate global hunger. First, moral force can be brought to bear on corporations and governments, but only if it rises from the grass roots and remains relatively uncorrupted by the interests it must court in order to be heard. Second, if human populations have a “right” to eat, they also have a correlative obligation not to procreate beyond manageable limits. Third, the husbandry and slaughter of domesticated cattle for flesh is a grossly inefficient and unhealthy way to manage both human diet and terrestrial biomass; while the products of the dairy industry are nothing but toxic waste to human metabolism, a dietary aberration that should likewise be abolished and replaced with wholesome and efficient vegetarian regimes. (That would also settle the matter of cows being better-treated than humans.) Fourth and ultimately, humanity must discover and implement a paradigm that encourages cultural diversity within a unifying human framework; that fosters political, religious and commercial interests alike, yet that curtails their catalogue of abuses with transcendent and effective moral sanction.

Having been stimulated to ponder the problem of human hunger, I am not sanguine about the prospects of any of these things being done, or done sufficiently to make a difference. Time and again, natural selection rears its ironic head, and decrees that humans are such fragile and dependent beings at birth, with such small prospects for survival, that they must draw from an seemingly inexhaustible well of self-regarding, rapacious and myopic egoism, contaminated with xenophobic instincts (that synthetic selection transposes into myths, doctrines and ideologies) which unfailingly sanctify their own tribe and demonize the adjacent one; and moreover that they shall be possessed of hyperbolic sexuality, such that they will tend to produce progeny in inverse proportion to their material resources.

These tendencies among others, which long ago favored our emergence from caves, abetted our dispersion across the planet, and furthered our adaptation to diverse
geographic conditions, now militate decisively against our species. Nietzsche saw the human being as a parasite on the earth’s crust; yet even he forbore from stating the obvious continuation of the analogy: That a wise (or at least a well-adapted) parasite does not kill its host. As top predators, humans have always killed one another along with everything else that moves or breathes; but now we are killing the very planet that once indulged and satiated our rapacious appetites.

If the likes of Dickens, Marx and Mill were so provoked by the excesses and dearths of the Industrial Revolution, what would they have said about the World Wars, revolutionary bloodbaths, genocidal manias and totalitarian slaughterhouses of the 20th century? Such mind-bending commentaries were reserved for the generation of Aldous Huxley, Arthur Koestler, George Orwell, Ayn Rand. Yet the 21st century is likely to witness horrors that would make these pale in turn.

As the exponential curve of human population continues to explode, as natural resources continue to be depleted or despoiled at equally alarming rates, and as dependency on cultural evolution increases accordingly, human populations will be subjected to naturally- and synthetically-induced catastrophes that will not result in the extinction of hunger or poverty, except via the extinction of our species. The future of moral discourse on these matters appears equally non-Panglossian. Humans excel both in imagining the best of all possible worlds for themselves, while creating the worst.

References


