Is the Refusal to end Poverty a form of Violence?

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MATTHEW FROST, NOV 20 2015

"The world is a raft sailing through space with, potentially, plenty of provisions for everybody; the idea that we must all cooperate and see to it that everyone does his fair share of the work and gets his fair share of the provisions seems so blatantly obvious that one would say that no one could possibly fail to accept it unless he had some corrupt motive for clinging to the present system."

~George Orwell, *The Road To Wigan Pier* (2001: 159).

"Whoever saves one life saves the world entire."

~Babylonian Talmud, Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:9; Tractate Sanhedrin 37a. (1918)

If twenty jumbo jets crashed in a single day, social uproar would ensue. Yet the same number of children – six thousand – die *every* day due to water-related diseases as a result of inadequate sanitation (Lester 2007: 21). A plane crash is a visceral, disturbingly violent and terrifying death, but also exceedingly uncommon. The latter is a normalised out of sight, out of mind anaesthetised affair for most Western citizens. David Lester's*The Gruesome Acts of Capitalism* is littered with these statistics, another: '$13 billion a year would satisfy the world's sanitation and food needs (about as much as the people of the U.S. and the European Union spend each year on *perfume*)' (Ibid: 26). In fact, two weeks of the American military budget could end world hunger (See Matthews 2008, and 'The Borgen Project'). It is clear that despite the myriad causes of third- world poverty, the wealth and resources exist to ensure that *it* need not. Doubtless there are practical issues but, logistics and infrastructure aside, the point here concerns obligation and refusal, not implementation. The two examples (perfume and weapons) can be divided into agentic[1] refusal and a structural refusal driven by ideology. This essay asks to what extent the lack of sufficient action at both levels to end third-world poverty can be said to be a form of violence.

Agentic Refusal

Everyday roughly a billion people enjoy the fruits of historically unprecedented affluence, levels of wealth, extravagance, and access to resources which would leave the kings of the Enlightenment astounded. As Singer writes, 'after buying (either directly or through their taxes) food, shelter, clothing, basic health services and education, the absolutely affluent still have money to spend on luxuries' (Singer 2011: 193). In a country like the United Kingdom (UK), a worker on the minimum wage who works 40 hours per week will earn approximately £13,000 per year (see givingwhatwecan.org). A figure 12.2 times the global average, which places them in the richest 9.8 per cent of the world's population (Ibid). Donating ten per cent of their salary would afford the Against Malaria Foundation the ability to purchase 361 mosquito nets, effectively guaranteeing at least one life would be saved (Ibid).[2] Moreover, the donor's income would still be eleven times the global average, leaving them in the richest 11.1 per cent of the world's population. The actual amount donated by the UK's poorest twenty per cent is around 3.2 per cent of their salary, with the richest twenty per cent donating only 0.9 per cent of their yearly earnings. However, Singer has famously made a philosophical case that even ten per cent would be a morally lacking sum.

Singer's argument, in short, revolves around three central premises. The first: Suffering is bad. Second: 'If it is in your power to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything nearly as important, it is wrong not to

do so'. Third: Donating to aid agencies prevents suffering 'without sacrificing anything nearly as important'. Conclusion: 'Therefore, if you do not donate to aid agencies, you are doing something wrong' (2010: 38-39). Singer uses this broadly uncontroversial, explicated logic in his drowning child analogy. He asks if it is right for an individual to wade into a shallow pond to save a drowning child on the proviso that they will muddy their finest shoes. Of course, only an immoral actor would let the child die. However, it seems there is no moral difference between doing so and not contributing as much as we can[3] – without sacrificing anything of moral equivalence – to those most in need.

The technical argument has proven to be rigorous and, for many, compelling.[4] It produces, for the vast majority of us, unrealistic and demanding expectations. However, we should not confuse an evaluation of the agent with that of their (in)action. In other words, just because the argument is morally challenging it does not follow that failure to fulfil the outlined obligations means anything more than 'that it is hard to be moral' (Shapcott 2007: 210). Social norms may overwrite our individual psychologies and emasculate claims that it is morally reprehensible to allow suffering to continue, however, Pogge argues that there is a 'direct comparison between those who passively support the international system and Germans who passively supported the Nazi regime' (2010: 212 n.119). For Pogge and Singer, being blinded by societal norms does not affect one's moral duty.

Indeed, in *Practical Ethics* (2011) Singer compares this passivity with the moral equivalence of murder:

The idea that we are responsible for our acts but not for our omissions is […] puzzling. On the one hand, we feel ourselves to be under a greater obligation to help those whose misfortunes we have caused […] On the other hand, any consequentialist would insist that we are responsible for all the consequences of our actions; and if a consequence of my spending money on an iPod is that someone dies, I am responsible for that death. It is true that the person would have died even if I had never existed, but what is the relevance of that? The fact is that I do exist, and the consequentialist will say that our responsibilities derive from the world as it is, not as it might have been (2011: 196).

Ultimately Singer believes 'failing to save a life may not always be ethically on par with deliberate killing' (2011: 198). However, his case clearly provides a firm basis from which we can ask whether agentic refusal is in itself a violent act. First we should clarify the type of violence we mean. Direct violence (or personal violence) usually refers to A purposefully harming B, whereas indirect violence is often described as structural (Ardizzone 2007: 1-3). It lacks the intentionality and directionality of the former, yet still contributes to the ongoing climate of violence or allows it to continue.[5] Both, however, lack the nuance required to fully capture the complexities of individual refusal. I would like to suggest that we can distinguish between a "weak" and a "strong" version of indirect violence resulting from agentic refusal, which Singer perhaps overlooks.

The weak version might be aptly characterised by the conscientious citizen who, despite not donating his time and earnings to the point of marginal utility, refuses to purchase items which rely on exploitative production methods. The strong version refers to the citizen whose purchases entrench inequality, and perpetuate violence and suffering. Both are indirectly violent insofar as they do not donate the money from their purchases to remedial charities, however, we might accuse the latter indifferent consumer with exacerbating the problem through their purchasing of goods, which require some form of exploitation.

However, we must also consider the roles of intentionality and ignorance in both examples. The conscientious citizen engaged in weak structural violence has thought through their position and concluded not to be part of the problem anymore. The citizen engaged in strong structural violence is either aware of the facts or not. There is a level of moral differentiation to be made here, for if the latter citizen *is* aware of the facts, it is possible they teeter on the brink of direct violence. Singer writes:

What of the difference in motivation? That a person does not positively wish for the death of another lessens the severity of the blame she deserves, but not by as much as is suggested by our present attitudes to giving aid. The behavior of the speeding motorist is again comparable, for such motorists usually have no desire at all to kill anyone. They merely want to get somewhere sooner, or they enjoy speeding and are indifferent to the consequences. Despite their lack of malice, those who kill with cars deserve not only blame but also severe punishment (2011: 198).

Yet Singer is addressing intentionality here only up to the point of indifference by distinguishing praise from blame and right from wrong. This all or nothing approach – you are either part of the solution or the problem – either circumvents the conscientious citizen or falsely portrays them as indifferent. It also neglects the citizen who is unaware of anything more than first-order consequences. Nevertheless, considering intentionality and ignorance does not prevent us from making an accusation of violence. It does, however, allow us to decipher whether the violence is, in legal parlance, intentional tort or negligence. That, in turn, is the first step towards a moral verdict and achieving a foothold when answering to what extent passivity can be deemed a violent act.

Structural Refusal

Thus far we have maintained a narrow focus on the individual as efficacious only through their role as a consumer, avoiding the philosophical elephant in the room: ideology. Capitalism, as the aquarium in which we swim, is inescapable. This is incommensurate with Singer's natural desire to speak about individuals and morality as if they were within a vacuum. As Zižek reminds us, ideology – in this case neoliberalism – acts as a mechanism which shapes the contours that pre- determine the selection of available choices in everyday life (Zižek 2010: 9-15). This mechanism is often shrouded by our own socialisation, meaning there is no *punctum archimedis* upon which we can escape to – we are constituted in and by discursive regimes, or 'epistemes' as Foucault would have it (Foucault and Bertani 2003: xix). Thus to answer to what extent structural refusal is a form of violence requires examining the machinery that shapes society by shaping individuals' choices such that they appear uniform or guided by tendrils of invisible power, power which perpetuates global inequities. Understanding neoliberalism's pervasiveness allows us to examine structural refusal as deeply entwined with, and a product of, ideology.

Fredy Perlman was a scholar who astutely captured ideology's systemic and all-encompassing role in his essay entitled 'The Reproduction of Everyday Life' (1969: 31-49). Unpacking Perlman's analysis, we find out how hegemonic norms are produced, replicated, and perpetuated, and this ultimately holds the key to viewing structural violence and refusal as norms in themselves. Perlman famously opens stating: 'The everyday practical activity of tribesmen reproduces, or perpetuates, a tribe' (Ibid: 31-49). He goes on to write that the modern corollary is that 'the practical everyday activity of wage- workers reproduces wage labor and capital' (Ibid: 31-49). Implicit in Perlman's writing here is a Marxist idea that states our hegemonic norms were developed through iterations of historical transitions. As Rousseau writes in the Second Discourse, these ideas 'depend on several prior ideas which could only spring up gradually one after another, it was not formed all at once in the human mind' (Rousseau 2004: 27).

Though many of Perlman's statements seem reductive or banal truisms, they contain a number of important observations. Namely that 'through their daily activities, "modern" men, like tribesmen and slaves, reproduce the inhabitants, the social relations and the ideas of their society; they reproduce the social form of daily life' (Perlman 1969: 31-49). Thus they reproduce the conditions for structural violence and subsequent refusal. However, Perlman also implies a notion of false consciousness; that is, such 'activities' are so deeply embedded as social norms that

[…] people do not know they carry out these processes; their own activities are not transparent to them. They are under the illusion that their activities are responses to natural conditions beyond their control and do not see that they are themselves authors of those conditions. The task of capitalist ideology is to maintain the veil which keeps people from seeing that their own activities reproduce the form of their daily life (Ibid).

Thus when inhabitants of a particular society in a particular phase of human history engage in activity, they do so always under the banner of invisible power structures. As Marx noted in *The 18th Brumaire*: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves' (Marx 1852). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the marketplace.

Markets appear to offer freedom of choice on an individual level.[6] However a closer examination reveals that markets are structural violence incarnate. By definition they act to divert resources to those with the available funds, regardless of how those funds were acquired, and so we would not expect needs to be addressed. In the first section, we discussed the conscientious citizen engaged in weak structural violence who sought to opt out of exploitative purchases so as not to further entrench inequality. However, one of their primary effects is to do just that. Let us take

an example where a legion of conscientious citizens purchases ethically sourced ice-cream.

To vaccinate every child in the world costs around ten times the price of what Europeans spend annually on ice-cream alone. As Kretz makes clear, 'if a clear option were available between ten per cent more ice-cream annually or the vaccination of innocent children, most would not choose the extra ice-cream' (Kretz, 2012: 09). Thus, the cumulative effect of individuals' daily transactions is to produce an unethical weighting of preferences that Singer so rightly scorns. For Singer our choice *is* between vaccination and ice-cream, but this systems theory approach highlights what Dennis, the anarcho-syndicalist peasant from Monty Python, would describe as 'the violence inherent in the system!' (1994). As Perlman's teacher C. Wright Mills wrote in *The Sociological Imagination*, 'the innumerable actions of innumerable men […] by ten-thousand decisions per minute, may shape and reshape the free-market economy', but it is still a free-market economy (1959: 201). Again, we find we cannot escape the aquarium.

In this example we observe a key driver of adiaphorisation – 'the authorisation and tolerance of the obscene on the lie that it is inevitable (Roberts 2010: 80). We witness a paradox of globalisation's time-space compression: its production of a cause and effect lag. Quoting Bauman, Roberts writes: 'the social production of distance […] separates cause from effect and reflects the imbalance between consequence and culpability […] 'morality seems to conform to the law of optical perspective'' (Ibid: 81). This all too often induces a political quietism in the rich West.

Thus for Ulrich Beck we become 'moral entrepreneurs laden with personal responsibility but with no access to the actual decisions' (Ulrich Beck in Marshall 2014: 173). This observation neatly bridges the gap between Singer's demand on the individual and the social structures they inhabit. The violence of structural refusal is guided by an ideology that is intent on atomising individuals ('the social production of distance') to the extent they are alienated from the cumulative consequences of their decisions, consequences they might not accept if a choice were put to them in the simplified equations Singer provides. Parallels to Hannah Arendt's banality of evil thesis abound: the totality is dependent on all individuals "just doing their job" (Arendt 2006: 195).

Conclusion

In summary, this essay has attempted to show the extent to which inaction on third-world poverty can be labelled a form of violence. Singer's provocative philosophical thought experiments allowed us to elucidate a moral lacuna between individual morality and action. However, we also turned to analyse the social forces driving indirect violence. In doing so, I attempted to tie together structure and agency by unpacking the ideology which guides both. It became clear that as a form of violence, the refusal to end poverty is constructed and deeply embedded within social institutions, such as the market. If the ultimate perpetuator of poverty is the inaction to redress the issue, understanding these points is crucial. Failure to do so will surely warrant critique from any future historian. Negligence and adiaphorisation do not excuse the violence, they only clarify its existence.

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Endnotes

[1] I opt for the admittedly jargon term 'agentic' over something such as 'personal', because the former stresses the

agent as something more than a 'reactive organism shaped by environmental forces or driven by inner impulses' (Pajares 2002).

[2] There are also many additional benefits: 'non-fatal cases of malaria prevented, prevention of deaths in age groups other than under-5 year olds, prevention of other mosquito-borne diseases, etc.' (see givewell.org).

[3] Singer literally means up until the point of marginal utility – anything bought beyond food, water, and shelter, is morally suspect.

[4] Singer goes beyond being a philosophical gadfly. He has set up a website listing the most efficacious charities (the lives saved per pound) and it encourages people to donate a percentage of their annual earnings – Singer, himself, donating forty per cent. Though there are practical arguments against doing all one can, Singer makes no *moral* case for this being enough (Rosenbaum and BBC Radio 4 2015).

[5] Of course, the violence allowed to continue through lack of aid is often direct and that direct violence can perpetuate oppressive structures and indirect violence, suggesting there is a permeable and cyclically reinforcing barrier between the two.

[6] Though to what extent choosing between a set of products under the influence of mass psychological manipulation (advertising) intended to mask flaws and accentuate trivial difference, can be said to be a free choice is questionable.

Written by: Matthew Frost
Written at: Loughborough University
Written for: Dr David Roberts
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