

Elizabeth Anderson on Moral Epistemology

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Moral Methodology

In her address to the American Philosophical Society in 2015, Elizabeth Anderson suggested that we should look at an alternative way of doing moral philosophy. The system whereby privileged individuals – mostly men – sat around and tested their moral intuitions in a number of imagined scenarios has not had a good track record. Moral philosophers need to get their hands dirty and look at the facts that are relevant for real-world decision makers on real-world problems.

Real-world moral decision making requires that we ask two questions at the start: Where should we start from? Where should we go from there?

Anderson's pragmatic philosophy suggests that there can only be one answer to the first question. We start from where we are. If you want to go to New York City, you will always take the first step from where you are standing. In the quest to improve our morality, we begin by locating our current attitudes - our moral beliefs, judgments, and sentiments - whatever they are. This does not mean that they are correct (there would be no sense to improving them under that assumption). It simply means acknowledging that "these are the moral attitudes that I have now."

Then, there is the question of deciding on a direction. Which alteration from where we are now counts as an improvement, rather than just a change? On this matter, Anderson suggests that real progress will not be made by the privileged academic's thoughts on imagined scenarios. It requires the input of a variety of different individuals each presenting their own perspective in a broad discussion.

I have long held that a number of philosophical thought experiments – such as the famous set of trolley problems – have nothing important to say about moral philosophy. Our moral sentiments have been engineered for the real world. That they do not work well in exotic situations in imaginary worlds should not come as a surprise.

In presenting the possibility of improvement, Anderson presents an example – the abolition of slavery. She does not defend any theory that counts this as an improvement – she simply counts it as one.

We can learn from the history of moral change how we might make progress in improving our practices of moral inquiry. Consider what may be the most dramatic worldwide progressive change in moral beliefs that has ever occurred. Three hundred years ago, few people in the world thought that slavery was morally wrong. Today, almost no one is willing to defend it.¹

I would trust that most people will not dispute the claim.

¹Elizabeth Anderson, "Moral Bias and Corrective Practices: A Pragmatist Perspective," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol 89.

Women's suffrage is another example of an improvement – once simply assumed to be morally prohibited, whereas in much of the world it is now considered a moral right.

There are some obvious examples of improvement. However, for many items that people currently debate, we need a way to discover which side is arguing for improvement.²

When it comes to discovering moral facts, Anderson tells us that some methods are better than others. We should discontinue the use of methods that have not in the past, and cannot in the future, give us much hope of a reliable moral conclusion.

We have reason to think that one source of moral knowledge is not quite reliable. This involves relatively affluent middle-aged white people sitting around comparing intuitions about exotic cases far removed from our day-to-day experience. This method has been unreliable in the past where it, in fact, endorsed slavery unquestionably for centuries as well as the subjugation of women, promoted the divine right of kings, supported colonization of foreign lands and domestic warfare for any number of reasons, and silenced speech and imposed its beliefs on whole communities through violence.

I would like to look at one of the intuition pumps commonly referenced in these discussions - Peter Singer's example of the drowning toddler.³ Singer asks the reader to imagine coming across a child drowning in a small puddle where rescuing the child will ruin one's clothes. Singer asserts that we judge it morally obligatory to rescue the child and suffer the cost of the clothes (in the sense that one can be morally blamed for not doing so). Yet, all of us are in a position where we can save a child by contributing the cost of a pair of shoes to an appropriate charity. Consequently, we are all blameworthy if we do not do so.

But wait a moment. How did the child end up in the puddle? We may assume that it is through no fault of her own. Yet, it may be the fault of others who put her in that position in total disregard for the fact that somebody must then rescue her. Those people are acting in ways that often end up putting countless children in just such a situation where they need to be rescued. One could spend one's time rescuing children, or one could spend one's time preventing children from ending up in a position where they need rescuing. Rescuing the child may not be the best option.

Singer devotes some consideration to the possibility that the best way to prevent this badness is by working to control the population. He prescribed that the person who took this view seriously would still have an obligation to pursue population control with the same determination as rescuing a child. In 1971, people did worry about overpopulation and its effect on poverty. Not only have those population concerns been shown to be misplaced, they still did not capture the complexities of the problem.

Let us suppose that a warlord – who has thrown the child in the pond (created the situation in which a child needs rescuing) – has also stationed one of his soldiers near the pond to demand \$50 from

² The fact that people debate an issue does not, itself, imply that there is no clear answer. The science of climate change, for example, is settled. The fact that some people dispute it does not imply that they have a good reason to do so.

³ Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 1972), pp. 229-243.

anybody wanting to rescue the child. Paying the warlord helps him to buy guns, pay soldiers, and strengthen his tyrannical hold on the region. One of the effects of this tyranny is the exploitation of regular people and families, putting them in a position where their children are at risk of death unless somebody pays to rescue them.

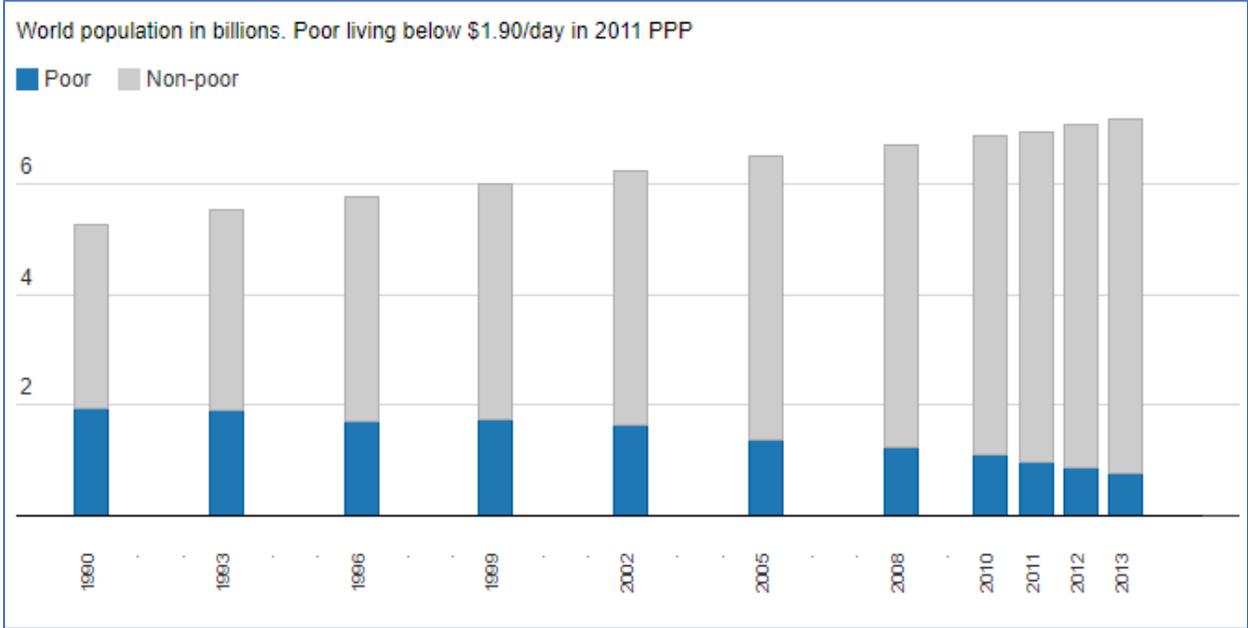
Now imagine that this soldier is a young teenage child, taken from some village five years earlier. Since then his captors have given him a place to sleep, enough to eat, friends who watch out for him, and a measure of security that comes from being a member of such a group. They pay for these goods using some of the money taken from those trying to rescue the child. It is the only life that this child has known – and leaving such a life means going back to utter starvation and insecurity at the hands of the next warlord and their army.

The point of these examples is to suggest that it does not take much to make the examples far more complicated than what we see in Singer’s original example. What seemed to be obviously the right thing in Singer’s simple universe may be useless to counter-productive in the real world. Once we make the situation complicated enough that our intuitions can be said to match the real-world situation, it has grown so complicated that we might as well be discussing the real-world situation.

Moral Intuitions and the Global Poor

Rescuing real children in the real world requires something other than an armchair or a seminar room. It requires knowledge of the world. What are the deficiencies? Who is impacted? What is the nature of the impact? The best solution to this problem may not be an act of giving money to charity.

The World Bank is dedicated to ending extreme poverty. Adjusted for inflation, the current measure of extreme poverty is defined as living off of about \$1.90 per day in US purchasing power equivalence. In 1990, the World Bank resolved to cut extreme poverty in half by 2020.



As the World Bank reports, “in 2013, 10.7 percent of the world’s population lived on less than US\$1.90 a day, that’s down from 35 percent in 1990.”⁴ Measured in terms of both percentage of population and in absolute numbers, global poverty has fallen significantly. The 2015 estimates are that this has dropped by 1.2 billion in absolute numbers – and by nearly 70% in terms of the proportion of total population.

The World Bank does not ask for charitable contributions. It seeks to promote an end to global poverty through investment.

As Anderson did on the issue of slavery, I will assert that this reduction in global poverty is generally a good thing.

This reduction in global poverty came about substantially by adopting principles of freedom in trade both within countries that did not have such freedoms in the past (e.g., China and India) and between countries where international negotiations took down trade barriers. This resulted in the “exportation of jobs” as companies opened up manufacturing centers where they could find less expensive labor.

In addition, unlike charitable contributions that Singer supported, the exportation of jobs created a long-term solution in those lands that obtained the benefit. People obtain the benefits over the course of years and decades.

Of course, it is out of the scope of this paper to conduct a detailed analysis of the merits of free trade. The claim that globalization produced a benefit for much of the global poor does not imply that it has no costs or effects that are immune from criticism for other reasons. It is sufficient to note that it provides a benefit not mentioned in the public debate in part because the beneficiaries have no voice in the discussion.

Participants in the Discussion

The methodology that Anderson recommends when we consider what we should be doing in the real world to solve real world problems involves including the voices of all of those who would be affected.

In *Integration*, Anderson writes about the importance of including other voices to prevent situations where, in part, those with a voice and the power to make decisions dismiss as irrelevant the interests of those who are excluded.⁵ This is not just a matter of including them so that their interests are represented, but including them because their perspective gives them access to information not otherwise available.

However, we face an important obstacle in attempting to apply this methodology to an issue such as foreign trade. Foreign workers are not allowed to be a part of the discussion regarding American economic policy, so the preferred policy is one of “opportunity hoarding” that disregards the well-being of excluded groups and suffers from the lack of information they would bring. In the specific case of the

⁴ World Bank, “Poverty Overview”, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview>, last accessed Sept. 22, 2017.

⁵ Anderson, Elizabeth. 2010. *The imperative of integration*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press

global poor, somebody should be in a position to ask the candidate who promises to return jobs to the United States, “And what do you expect us to do? Go back to starving on less than \$1.90 per day?”

In the last Presidential campaign in the United States, two major-party Presidential candidates, Republican Donald Trump and Democrat Bernie Sanders, raised objections to companies that “exported jobs” and promised to end the practice and even to bring those jobs back to the United States. However, in that discussion neither the politicians nor the press nor most of the voters asked about the effects of these policies on the global poor. These issues were not raised and shown not to have merit – they were not even raised.

This at least suggests that there may be bases where important decisions are made at a level where all of those who will be affected have a voice in the decision. Anderson’s principles of democracy seems to imply, in part, having a nations laws regarding trade, climate change and other forms of pollution that cross national boundaries, the management of the deep seas and space resources, determined by an international government. That is the only level at which the type of democracy that Anderson defends can actually exist with respect to these issues.

Conclusion

So, if we accept the premises of Anderson’s argument, we seem to be forced into a conclusion that humanity has reached a point – given the global impact of some of our actions – where we need global governing and deliberative bodies. If democracy requires that all of those effected have a voice, and if all of those effected are the various people around the globe, then Anderson seems to have no choice but to call for a global democracy.

This is not necessarily a bad idea.

It is, however, a very large step to take.