Elizabeth Anderson and Moral Epistemology (20180103)
Alonzo Fyfe

Introduction
This is a paper in moral epistemology – on how we can more reliably know that an action is right or a policy is just.

I have defended the thesis that the right act is the act that a person with good desires and lacking bad desires would have done in the circumstances.

I have also claimed that a good desire in the relevant sense is a desire that tends to fulfill other desires to the degree that it can be made universal. A bad desire is a desire that tends to thwart other desires.

To illustrate these points, I use an example where there is a community whose members all have an aversion to their own personal pain. They also have the capacity to create in others an aversion to causing pain to others by praising those who refrain from causing pain and act in ways that tend to cause pain to others.

In this community it is true that people generally have reasons to promote, universally, an aversion to causing pain to others. They do so by calling such actions "wrong" and condemning those who perform them, while cheering those who choose their own pain rather than inflict pain on others.

However, this is an artificially simple community. Real societies are filled with varied and complex individuals. This means that it is often difficult to determine whether we are promoting desires that tend to fulfill other desires, or whether we are consciously or unconsciously leaving certain interests out when making our calculations.

Elizabeth Anderson: Moral Methodology
In her address to the American Philosophical Society in 2015, Elizabeth Anderson questioned the standard ways in which moral philosophers practiced moral philosophy. It did not provide the assurances it should provide that it is considering the interests of people other than those of a select group – mostly white, male, from relatively prosperous backgrounds, with an inclination towards intellectual pursuits.

The system she objected to was one in which privileged individuals – mostly men – sat around and tested their moral intuitions in a number of imagined scenarios. It does not have a good track record. It has justified slavery and the subjugation of women, the divine right of kings and the natural superiority of aristocrats, policies contributing to a few families hoarding most global wealth, crusades, inquisitions, and genocide.

Can we come up with something better?

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."

John McDowell and Rosalind Hursthouse call this the Neurathian procedure, named for a way of thinking about this project that came from Otto Neurath. Neurath invited us to imagine being on a ship at sea in need of repairs. We cannot disassemble the ship and start from scratch. We would lose all of our cargo and likely drown. What we do is improve one part of the ship at a time. So, we start with our damaged moral ship as it is and see if we can make improvements.

Then, there is the question of deciding on a plan. Which alteration should we make first? In what direction should we sail? What will count as an improvement?

Here is where Anderson suggests that real progress will not come from the thoughts of privileged academics on imagined and entirely unrealistic scenarios. It requires the input of a variety of different individuals each presenting their own perspective in a broad discussion on real-world issues.

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 – they need to be engineered for the real world. They need to guide us through the many and varied circumstances we find ourselves in daily. The more common the circumstance, the more weight we need to give it in engineering our moral sentiments. Correspondingly, circumstances that we will never encounter in out real-world lives deserve no weight at all.

In presenting the possibility of improvement, Anderson presents an example – the abolition of slavery.

> *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]*

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] To examine this question, this, I would like to take one of these intuition pumps and show how real-world variables confuses things.

---

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

[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.

The case that I would like to look at concerns 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 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 is 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 paying 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.
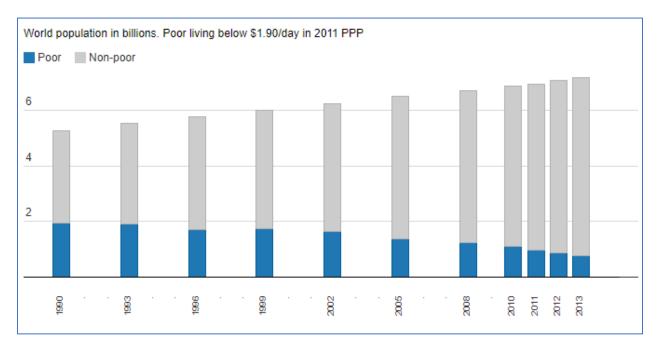
The point of these examples is to suggest that it does not take much to make the examples far more complicated than what we see in Singer's original example. What seemed to be obviously the right thing in Singer's simple universe may be useless to counter-productive in the real world. Once we make the 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.

---

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

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.

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

The World Bank does not ask for charitable contributions of the type Singer argues for. It seeks to promote an end to global poverty through investment. The strategy that Singer suggested from his arm chair seems to be far less effective than the solutions that the Wold Bank came up with.

This reduction in global poverty came about substantially by adopting principles of freedom in trade both within countries that did not have such freedoms it in the past (e.g., China and India) and between

---

[4] World Bank,"Poverty Overview", http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview, last accessed Sept. 22, 2017.

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. A charitable contribution lasts until the money is gone. A job that increases household income from $700 per year to $3,500 per year provides benefits over years and decades. Research further shows that these wages are not stagnate. They rise – particularly as these families spend their additional income creating more demand for labor.

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.

Participants in the Discussion

Anderson argues that one of the ways we can acquire better moral knowledge is by including more of the different types of people impacted by a policy, practice, or principle in the discussion. It needs to include more than just highly educated, economically privileged white males. 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. As a consequence, we in America discuss issues such as global trade without hearing the voices of people whose options are these exported jobs or extreme poverty. 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.

We face the same problem with respect to climate change, where we debate policies that have the potential to destroy foreign lives – cities and whole nations – and we do not hear their voices.

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 seem to

---

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

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.

Global Governance

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's views seem to imply a call for global democracy. This is the only way to see to it that those who are impacted by a policy, who exist outside of the national borders of those who are making the policy, have a voice in what affects them.

There is a quick and easy argument defense of a policy. When a government creates policy and imposes it on a people who do not have a voice in that policy, we call that tyranny. The very idea of democracy is that the people impacted by law will have a voice in the making of that law. There is now other way in which we can describe a situation where one government creates policies that impact the people of another country – who do not get a vote. If tyranny is a moral evil – if people have a right to a say in the making of the laws that have an impact on their interests – then this practice of making laws that impact the people of other countries without giving them a voice is a moral evil.

And if this is not a moral evil, then how can tyranny be wrong?

A great many laws would fall under this description. I have introduced the topic concerning the issue of international trade – to "exporting jobs" to the people of other countries whose household income then doubles . . . triples . . . and keeps going up.

It is also applicable to matters of climate change, where one country's actions have the capacity to destroy the coastal cities of other nations, and even to destroy whole nations. There is a sense in which actions of this type would be seen as a declaration of war against the country harmed. Indeed, I have no doubt that there will be people who see it this way and, lacking any effective voice in the government that is passing the laws that destroy their nation, will seek other ways to make sure that the offending country pays for their injustice.

It must be thought to include one nation's plans for military interference in another country. There is a close analogy between a nation sending in the military to impose its view on a people who had no voice in that government, and a dictator sending the Royal Guard into a disobedient town who had no choice in the selection of that leader or his policies.

This idea of putting such policies under the authority of a global democratic state is certainly a big step. Yet, there was a time when the idea of democracy itself was a big step. The abolition of slavery and allowing women to have a voice in the government that makes policies impacting the interests of women was a big step. Sometimes, doing the right thing is a big step.

I have no hope of covering this policy within the confines of this one short paper. I did, however, want to bring up the implication. I do not think that a rational and reasonable person could easily dismiss the conclusion.