Diana Tietjens Meyers (editor)
Poverty, Agency, and Human Rights
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014 (ISBN 978-0199975877)

Reviewed by Heather Stewart, 2017

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In *Poverty, Agency, and Human Rights,* Diana Tietjens Meyers has synthesized a compelling examination of the moral and political dimensions of global poverty and its relation to human agency, by bringing into conversation a collection of essays that are individually insightful, but particularly forceful when read together. This book consists of four parts: first, an analysis of the meaning(s) of poverty, and how these meanings differ among those inside and outside of poverty; second, an analysis of ethical responses to global poverty; third, an examination of proposed strategies for promoting development while maintaining respect for agency and empowering the intended beneficiaries; and fourth, an analysis of the moral significance of constraints imposed by severe poverty. Taken together, these essays provide a systematic analysis of the "underappreciated link" between preventable human poverty and human agency (3).

Some general themes and questions woven throughout the essays are: how should we conceive of poverty and the moral wrong(s) of poverty, what are the moral obligations of agents in the "developed world" to address poverty and related wrongs in the "developing world," and what is the best way for those in the "developed world" to meet their obligations in a way that is respectful of the agency of the "victims" of poverty? These are difficult and important questions, and the essays in this collection offer an important dialectic that brings out various salient features of each question, and helps highlight what is at stake in each. The essays provide the critical reader with important lenses and perspectives through which to analyze these central questions of global poverty, and will hopefully encourage continued thinking and discussion on these crucial matters.

The book begins with an introduction by Meyers, which sets the tone for the remainder of the essays. Meyers reminds us that poverty is the avoidable result of human agency, and as such, must be remedied through human action (3). Moreover, she argues, mitigating poverty is not a matter of charity, but rather is urgently *demanded by justice*. The

subsequent essays explore the connection between poverty and agency and defend stringent duties to alleviate it.

The first step toward examining the link between poverty and agency is to have a better understanding of what we mean by "poverty." This is the aim of part one. In the first chapter, Claudia Card examines the meaning of poverty in a bottom-up fashion, by considering the testimonies and perspectives of those who have experienced poverty firsthand. Card describes her understanding of poverty as anchored in her experience as an "intimate onlooker" to poverty, as well as in witnessing and speaking with those who themselves have been deeply affected by it (21-22). Card situates this piece within the broader context of her work on atrocities. She takes "atrocity" to refer to a paradigm case of extreme evil, whereby inexcusable wrongs lead to intolerable harms. Viewing poverty within the atrocity paradigm has implications for our duties to respond to it. Specifically, Card argues that we should aim to mitigate existing poverty, rather than to eliminate poverty outright (36). Although she concedes that this approach would not address the underlying causes of poverty, she contends that it would decrease the harms experienced by those currently suffering from poverty, thereby lessening its evil. Surely from the perspective of those in poverty *now,* this is what is most pressing.

David Ingram offers another perspective on the meaning of poverty. Drawing on Habermasian discourse ethics and social epistemology, Ingram suggests that if poverty theorists take seriously the perspectives of those in poverty, they will refocus their analyses on the central role of *coercion* in poverty (43-44). One very useful insight of Ingram's essay concerns the role of governmental and corporate interests in influencing poverty research and its so-called findings, which tend to focus on the role of individual "choice" in poverty, thus obscuring the fundamental role of systemic forces of coercion. Ingram rightly suggests that such individualistic views of poverty contribute to victim-blaming and stereotyping of those in poverty. Reframing poverty research to more seriously engage with the perspectives of those in poverty could help to illuminate the coercive nature of poverty (45). Furthermore, engaging in face-to-face dialogues with those in poverty, Ingram suggests, would help foster empathy by putting poverty researchers more in touch with the human side of poverty (46).

The final essay in part one, by Meyers, continues to explore the connections between poverty and coercion, focusing on transnational migration. She argues that severe poverty in countries with a large deficit of decent work (LDDW) is coercive in that it compels people to migrate in search of opportunities elsewhere, despite the hazards involved in crossing national borders. Meyers builds on Ingram's critique of overly individualizing accounts of poverty that put too much weight on individual choice and agency, thereby ignoring the coerciveness of impoverished social environments (69). This misunderstanding of poverty, Meyers suggests, contributes to the inhumane immigration policies of countries in the global North. Contra standard individualistic understandings of coercion, Meyers draws upon two alternative models of coercion--the "refugee model" and the "hostile environment sexual harassment model"--to argue that poverty in LDDW countries constitutes a form of structural coercion. From this she argues convincingly that migrants from LDDW countries ought to be considered economic refugees.

Part two of the anthology considers various ways of responding ethically to poverty. The essays explore the nature of gendered global injustices, particularly those associated with poverty, as well as the collective responsibilities they generate. The first essay in this section, by Elizabeth Ashford, argues for shared responsibility for the "systemic violations of basic human rights" experienced in situations of poverty, where this responsibility is grounded not only in agents' participation in unjust social norms, but in their complicity with invasive social mores (99). Specifically, Ashford argues that individual agents in affluent countries share direct responsibility for the human rights violation of allowing severe poverty to continue in developing countries (100).

The next essay, by Gillian Brock, continues the discussion of responsibility for global injustice. Brock focuses on the responsibilities generated by exploitative transactions that leave those in the developing world without good options. Brock argues that citizens of the developed world have significant responsibilities to correct the unjust background conditions that enable such transactions by ensuring that people in "developing" countries have opportunities to lead decent lives compatible with human rights and to just conditions of work and decent standards of living, as well as by promoting social and international order that can support those rights (122). The obligation to promote these more-just background conditions rests on the benefits received through unjust arrangements such as unfair global economic policies, brain drain, and so on.

In the next chapter, Leslie P. Francis and John G. Francis also defend forward-looking responsibilities that are derived from benefits received, but focus their attention specifically on human trafficking and the obligations it generates in destination countries (146). They intend to justify obligations to victims of trafficking over and above those owed to *all* "victims" of severe poverty (148). Human trafficking is a particularly challenging global issue, they contend, given that enforcement of anti-trafficking laws is quite difficult. Consequently, "trafficking continues to flourish without effective deterrence on especially the international but also the intranational level (157). Nonetheless, Francis and Francis claim that trafficking victims have special claims to remediation, above those of all victims of poverty-based injustice (157). They argue that in order to combat the harms of trafficking, enforcement against recipients of trafficked peoples needs to be stepped up and victims need to be better supported (164).

Alison Jaggar's contribution concludes part two. She argues that systematic gendered inequalities persist on a global scale, and offers a moral analysis of the wrongs involved in such gendered inequalities (171). Drawing on the work of Susan Moller Okin and Iris Marion Young, Jaggar understands inequalities between states as "transnational cycles of gendered vulnerability," which place women in systematically weak bargaining positions, enabling gendered rights violations and exploitation (174-78). Remedies for such gendered vulnerabilities, Jaggar argues, have generally been focused on the micro level; however, they must assume a transnational focus if they are to truly address global gender disparities.

The third part focuses on strategies for promoting development while ensuring agency. The chapters explore the multiple meanings of "agency," suggesting various ways in which poverty-alleviation strategies can either enhance or harm the agency of the poor. The first essay in this section, by Ann Cudd, focuses on the ways in which poverty deprives people of agency, and attempts to refocus poverty-alleviation strategies on enhancing what she calls *normative agency* (199). Cudd argues that there are pragmatic reasons that can help motivate the non-poor to engage in poverty-alleviation strategies that help develop normative agency for the poor (199, 205). Poverty, she argues, is detrimental to the poor and non-poor alike, insofar as it precludes opportunities for interactions of mutual advantage, increases social unrest that affects everyone, and reinforces gender inequality for all women (209-11). In light of her suggestion that the poor and non-poor should work together on mutually advantageous poverty-alleviation strategies, her essay recommends potentially successful ways in which poverty intervention ought to proceed, as well as makes suggestions about how we ought *not* to intervene (206, 214-17). She argues that commercial partnerships with the poor are the most transformative and empowering poverty-alleviation strategies (216), and are likely to appeal to the non-poor since they are beneficial to the non-poor as well as the poor (218).

Serene J. Khader's essay considers why women in poverty might engage in "self-subordination," given that at times a decrease in "feminist agency" (or acting in ways that seem to be disempowering from a feminist perspective) can correspond to an increase in welfare agency (231). More specifically, Khader advances what she refers to as the "self-subordination social recognition paradox" (SSRP), which holds that women can often gain welfare by complying with and internalizing oppressive [gendered] norms (224). Many social goods depend on social recognition, Khader argues, and in patriarchal societies, women often have to subordinate themselves to achieve social recognition. Her essay suggests an important distinction between "welfare agency" and "feminist agency," which she argues can help us to make sense of the phenomenon of self-subordination. Additionally, Khader argues that this distinction can be useful in analyzing poverty-alleviation strategies, by helping us pay attention not only to whether individual women's lives are improving (welfare agency), but also to the gender landscape in which women are operating (feminist agency) (244).

In the next chapter, Amy Allen considers the political and normative "paradoxes of development," examining how development rhetoric and actual attempts at development have functioned to make the recipients worse off (205). Following the work of Cristina Lafont, Allen argues for a pluralistic understanding of human-rights obligations (and specifically, the right to development), which places the burden on governments to protect the rights of their own citizens, while also ensuring that in doing so they do not violate the rights of citizens in other states (265-66).

The final part examines poverty within the context of transnational transactions. The first essay of the section, by Alan Wertheimer, considers research within the context of poverty, and whether it can be voluntary. Wertheimer ultimately argues that we ought to relax our insistence that valid consent must necessarily be voluntary, since conditions of

poverty often preclude voluntariness in various ways (such as, for instance, being subjected to undue influence or desperation) (289). We should not automatically preclude those in conditions of poverty from participating in research on the grounds that we do not feel their willingness to participate is sufficiently voluntary, especially when it is in their best interests to participate (297).

Next, Anca Gheaus considers the care drain caused by domestic-worker migration and the social and psychological effects this discontinuous care has on children. The essay aims to explain how it can be the case that despite harms to children, parents are still morally entitled to migrate in pursuit of better opportunities (300). Second, the essay aims to address the best ways to balance the rights of parents with their responsibilities to their children. Gheaus argues that states ought to be responsible for mitigating some of the harms that children face in light of discontinuous care, such as by offering counseling for children whose parents are absent (301). The important contribution of the essay is the idea that severe poverty imposes constraints and impairs the options of parents, so if their circumstances force them to migrate in pursuit of work or resources, they cannot be blameworthy for the subsequent psychological and emotional harms to their children (303).

The final essay, by John Christman, considers whether a human-rights framework is the most useful way of conceptualizing the wrong of human trafficking, and of motivating forward-looking action in response to it (321). Christman highlights difficulties with straightforwardly applying a human-rights framework in the attempt to explain the wrongs of trafficking faced by individuals, and suggests instead that anti-trafficking efforts need to be broader "attacks on systemic injustice," which address the systemic issues that enable trafficking--exploitative labor conditions, coercive processes of labor migration, global inequality, oppressive restrictions on immigration, and patriarchal gender roles and attitudes (323). Christman sees the "systemic injustice model" as a promising alternative to understanding the wrongs of trafficking, which improves upon the weaknesses of the human rights framework. The "systemic injustice model" of trafficking also bears on responsibility--it implicates destination nations, especially in the developed world, in the forward-looking project of improving background conditions that lead to trafficking in the first place, and attending to the needs of survivors and victims of trafficking (323). Christman suggests that it is the complicity of those in destination countries that gives rise to these obligations, an argument quite in line with that offered by Ashford in chapter 4. Meyers's choice to end the book with Christman's essay was an effective way to prompt reflection on the overall themes of the book: human rights, poverty, agency, responsibility, and social injustice. Ending the conversation with an alternative approach to conceptualizing the wrongs of poverty was a thought-provoking note on which to bring this important conversation to a close. We are left to consider whether a human rights framework is the best way to conceive of the wrongs of poverty, and if so, who bears the responsibility for those rights violations. In the spirit of Iris Young's influential "social connection model" (Young 2011), many of the chapters suggest that the responsibility for promoting justice falls on all those who are implicated in the structures that produce and maintain systemic global poverty. Christman and

Ashford, for instance, each suggest that our complicity in injustice grounds our forward-looking obligations. If this is so, we all surely have work to do.

Meyers's collection is an important contribution to the philosophical discussions surrounding moral responsibility for global injustice, global poverty, and moral agency more generally. Meyers's book and the essays contained in it provide a crucial starting point for more discussions to come, which will hopefully lead to more developed and nuanced ways of understanding the complex links between poverty and agency. Only when we fully understand these links between human action and the moral wrongs of poverty will we be in a position to effectively motivate and enact the changes necessary to finally eradicate avoidable, human-caused poverty on a global scale. This project is a profound step in that direction.

Reference

Young, Iris Marion. 2011. *Responsibility for justice.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.