Poverty and the Moral Significance of Contribution

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The main thesis of the article is that one's responsibility to render assistance is not affected by having contributed to the situation by causing harm. I examine ways in which contribution to need is morally significant. Although contribution is relevant with regard to certain features, such as questions of blame, compensation, and fair distribution of the cost of assistance, I argue that contribution should carry no weight when assessing our duty to assist people in severe need if we can do so at little cost. If this is true we have reason to suspect that it is redundant to know whether or not we have in fact contributed to the need of the global poor when assessing our duty to address global poverty.

Discussing our duty to fight global poverty, Thomas Pogge argues that we need to take into account the (harmful) effect of our actions and behaviour on poverty. Rather than seeing our duty to the poor as an instance of the general duty to assist people in need, we should look upon it as based on the duty not to contribute to harm. And if, indeed, it is true that we—the affluent in the West—have contributed to the poverty of the global poor, it seems plausible to concede that we have a particularly strong duty to help protect these people from dying of hunger and other poverty-related causes.

Putting to one side the unresolved empirical issues at stake, I want to challenge the inference made in the last statement. More expressly, I want to challenge the necessity of bringing our putative contribution to global poverty into the assessment of our moral obligation to do something about it. I pursue this line of questioning by investigating the moral significance of contribution,

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1. For two recent evaluations of the claim that affluent people in the West contribute global poverty see: Bashar Haydar, 'Extreme Poverty and Global Responsibility', Metaphilosophy 36 (2005), pp. 240-52 (243), and Mathias Risse, 'Do We Owe the Global Poor Assistance or Rectification?', Ethics & International Affairs 19 (2005), pp. 9-18.
and find that it does not seem to matter whether we are (partly) to blame for
causing the problem we wish to assuage, when it comes to assessing our duty
to provide assistance.  

3. Throughout the article I assume that it is possible to improve the distribution of
benefits and burdens in such a way that significantly fewer people will die of poverty-related
causes. This may or may not be possible through simple donations; institutional reforms
could very well be required.

The Principle of Contribution

Pogge’s starting point is an uncontroversial moral principle widely accepted
in our society, namely that it is wrong (severely) to harm innocent people for
minor gains. This is a plausible principle, and it is hard to think of instances
in which it does not apply. In accordance with it, one could hold that agents
have a particular responsibility to address problems when they have contributed, or are
contributing, to bring them about. We can call this ‘the principle of contribu-
tion’.  

The intuitive force of the principle of contribution derives from the idea
that it is wrong to harm others for minor gain. A pre-theoretical and conspicu-
ous idea of harming is based on a notion of causing pain, loss, dependence
and all manner of things regarded as unpleasant. To harm someone for minor
gain is morally wrong because of the consequences on those affected. That
we should not harm people for minor gain is in need of no further justifica-
tion. On the contrary, the observation may be used to justify other moral
principles. By saying this I do not intend to fight shy of philosophical con-
troversies about what should count as harm. That there are deep philosophical
problems connected to what it ultimately means to harm someone does not
temper the intuitive force of the prohibition against harming others for minor
gain. Here we trade on our pre-theoretical understanding of the term, as it
comes into play when one person drives over or hits another person. There
may therefore be good reasons for appropriating the idea that it is wrong to
harm innocent people for minor gain when arguing our duty toward the
global poor, namely that it is widely accepted and that it demands no further
justification.

4. Christian Barry used the term ‘contribution principle’ in a talk held at the Global
Justice conference in Oslo 2003. In a recent article, Barry has given the following formula-
lation of his contribution principle: ‘agents are responsible for addressing acute deprivations
when they have contributed, or are contributing, to bringing them about’ (Christian Barry,
not see why a principle of contribution should include a particular concern for the acutely
deprived. What is essential according to the idea of contribution is that we do not con-
tribute to harm, not that we do not contribute to acute deprivation. In case we should show
particular concern for the acutely deprived that would have to be on other grounds. Anyway,
my concern here is exactly to question the idea that contributors have a particular concern
for, in the sense of duty to assist, their acutely deprived victims.
To simplify matters, I only discuss cases in which it is fairly clear that the contributors in question do in fact contribute to harm.\(^5\) I also let our pre-theoretical understanding of harming inform the examples I use. If the insignificance of contribution could be demonstrated at this level, we have no reason to assume that the kind of harm for which the affluent in the West (eventually) are responsible would impinge on their duty to assist the global poor.

The principle of contribution may be said to have two implications with regard to world poverty. The first is that we ought not to act in such a way as to add to world poverty and, if we do, we ought to stop doing so. The second implication is that we ought to help victims of poverty if we have contributed to bring it about.\(^6\) I see no problem in accepting the first contention.\(^7\) It is the second implication I query, namely that our contribution to world poverty will determine to a greater or lesser extent the strength of our duty to help protect people from poverty and its consequences.

I look at the general version of the principle of contribution—that by being a contributor to harm one has a particular strong duty to assist those who are victims of one's conduct. We can distinguish between two aspects of this general claim.\(^8\) (1) A contributor to harm, rather than some bystander, has a stronger duty to assist those who are victims of his or her conduct; (2) a contributor to harm has a stronger duty to assist those who are victims of his or her conduct, rather than to assist some other needy people. The distinction here is important because while the first differentiates prospective assistors only, the second differentiates between a contributor and his or her victim.

**Fairness Aspect**

Concerning the first aspect, I should think morality requires a contributor as well as a bystander to assist a person in need if they can do so at little cost to themselves.\(^9\) However, *considerations of fairness* may require a contributor

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5. There is, of course, a question concerning the level of evidence that should be required in order to establish that we do so. For an interesting discussion of contribution under uncertainty, see Barry, 'Applying the Contribution Principle', pp. 210-27.

6. This is in accordance with Haydar: 'I take the claim that an agent is responsible for some harm to mean that the agent has special obligation to alleviate that situation or prevent it from taking place' (Haydar, 'Extreme Poverty and Global Responsibility', p. 240).

7. This first implication could be taken to imply that if we could establish that a particular society, Rich, does in fact contribute to the poverty of another society, P\(_1\), then Rich ought to prevent this from continuing before it uses its resources to help another poor society, P\(_2\), with whom it has no interaction. If there is an unjust interaction between Rich and P\(_1\), and no interaction between Rich and P\(_2\), then we could say that it is more important that Rich terminates its unjust relations to P\(_1\) than that it assists P\(_2\).

8. I am grateful to Robert Huseby for helping me to be clear on these matters.

9. According to Peter Singer, a plausible principle states that if we can prevent something bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, we ought to do it (Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], p. 230). A less demanding reinterpretation of the principle of assistance states that if we can prevent something bad from happening at low cost to ourselves, we ought to do it.
rather than a mere bystander to assist a person in need if both are able to do so, provided that it is enough that only one person assists the needy. A bystander may fairly require a contributor to address harm for which he or she is responsible, rather than letting others shoulder that duty. This having been said, we should keep in mind that fairness considerations are something that holds between contributors and bystanders, and that the duty to assist a needy person may be left untouched by such considerations. The implication would be that the failure of a contributor to assist his or her victim is unfair towards the bystander, insofar as the duty to render assistance thereby falls on the bystander.

In *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory*, Liam Murphy argues that the optimizing principle of beneficence imposes its demands unfairly in situations of partial compliance. If an agent is complying with the optimizing principle, but others are not, she not only has to do her own fair share, but she has to take on as much of the shares of the non-complying others as is optimal as well. This is unfair, according to Murphy, who in redress suggests a ‘compliance condition’, which states, ‘the demands on a complying person should not exceed what they would be under full compliance with the principle’. But the unfairness constraint of the compliance condition does not seem convincing. If some people need assistance it seems implausible to say that a particular person’s duty to assist depends on what others do; that kind of consideration concerns fairness between prospective assistors only. It would be better to say that each person’s duty to render assistance depends on the costs to the agent weighed up against the needs of the unfortunate. This implies that if enough people fail to do their fair share, the cost to an agent may very well exceed what may be required of him or her. The agent would therefore have no duty to assist those in need. But unfairness between the complying and non-complying should not be conflated with what is morally required of each agent.

True, when sorting out individuals’ respective duty to assist people in need, we should distribute the burdens of assistance fairly. In order to do

10. In this sense I agree with Pogge when he maintains that if having attacked a particular person, ‘the attacker has more reason to ensure that his victim’s injuries are treated than a bystander’ (Thomas Pogge, ‘Real World Justice’, *The Journal of Ethics* 9 [2005], pp. 29-53 [34]).


12. A similar point is made by Arneson who maintains that: ‘The mere fact of non-compliance by some does not automatically set an upper limit on the amount of sacrifice it is reasonable to demand of others who can provide cost-effective aid’ (Arneson, ‘Moral Limits on the Demands of Beneficence’, p. 37).

13. This is, as I understand it, part of what David Miller takes to be the problem of
that we need to know who did what to whom. And if Pogge's agenda were to determine how the burden of responsibility for helping the poor should be distributed, fairness considerations would be crucial. But this, in my opinion, is not the crux of the principle of contribution, nor, indeed, do I believe it is for Pogge. The main point of the principle, I maintain, is its first aspect, namely that a contributor to harm has a stronger duty to assist those who are victims of his or her conduct rather than to assist other needy people. And this is so because he or she has harmed the former and not the latter.

Significant Features of Contribution

Before discussing whether our responsibility for generating need increases the onus on us to alleviate that need, I want to explore why we are inclined to think so in the first place. I believe we conflate the duty of assistance with other morally significant features of being a contributor (in addition to the fairness aspect already discussed). It is therefore pertinent to take a look on some such significant features.

Pogge asks us to imagine by the side of a country road, an injured child who must be rushed to the hospital if her leg is to be saved. As a competent bystander who ignores her plight, you are subject to moral criticism for failing to assist. But if you are the driver who injured the child in the first place, then more is morally at stake: by leaving the child's needs unattended, you would greatly increase the harm you will have done her.

I think we may agree that more is morally at stake here if we are the driver of the vehicle that struck her. We do not need to assume that more is at stake because we have left our victim unattended. For example, if we were morally at fault by driving recklessly, we would have good reason to judge ourselves more harshly than if we had driven carefully. And this judgment would not depend on whether we abandoned the injured child. Leaving the child's needs remedial responsibility. See his 'Distributing Responsibility', Journal of Political Philosophy 9 (2001), pp. 453-71.

14. According to Christian Barry all participants in the debate concerning access to antiretroviral medicines for the treatment of those suffering from HIV/AIDS seem to agree that, 'were it to be shown that certain actors have substantially contributed to these deprivations, it would be their responsibility (though perhaps not solely their responsibility) to try to remedy them' (Barry, 'Applying the Contribution Principle', pp. 211-12). In this quote it seems as if Barry is talking about fairness considerations among prospective assistors, and not the question whether a contributor to harm has a stronger duty to assist victims of his or her conduct rather than some other people in severe need. But it is important to maintain this distinction and that though one grants the one significance, one might deny significance to the other.

15. It might be that Pogge would say that his main focus is on what I took to be the first implication of the principle of contribution, namely that we ought not to act in such a way as to add to world poverty and, if we do, we ought to stop doing so.

unattended is a separate event from the event, which brought the child in a position of need in the first place.

In order to tease out various significant features of being a contributor to need, let me modify Pogge’s example: While driving along a road you turn up the music and accelerate. Things go well for a while, but suddenly you lose control of the vehicle and hit a pedestrian on the sidewalk. You stop the car, get out and inspect the situation. The person looks as if he needs urgent medical assistance. You therefore drive him to a hospital nearby. In this case, your culpability in the accident is plain: you have harmed the person. What is not plain is the moral significance of having caused the accident in the first place.

First of all, you are to be blamed for not having taken appropriate steps in order to avoid harming other people by your behaviour. You ought to have driven more carefully, and since you did not you are morally responsible for a morally reprehensible deed and are therefore blameworthy. In this sense, we could say with Pogge, that ‘more is morally at stake’ when you have contributed to harm the injured person. Negligent or reckless behaviour is central when assessing a person’s culpability.17

A second morally significant feature of being a contributor is that you thereby owe the person compensation for any material damages (and that you pay for appropriate treatment if need be). Owning him compensation is something you are responsible for, not anyone else. Indeed, if you damage another person’s car, however slightly, you are still materially accountable to that owner. No one else needs to pay for the repairs, and should you fail to honour your obligation, it does not revert to anybody else. The duty to compensate applies to you only, and though it might be limited, the cost of damages for which you are liable may far exceed what would be required of others who respond to the general duty to assist people in need.18 Moreover, many people would say that compensation is owed regardless of whether or not you were a culpable contributor.

A third implication of being a contributor of harm comes into play if the cost of providing assistance increases. When the costs are considerable, a contributor may seem to be obliged to render the type of assistance that mere bystanders would not. If saving the life of a stranger means one loses an arm, for instance, the cost of helping may seem too much to demand of bystanders. Yet I think we could require a contributor to assist a victim even if the cost were that acute (depending on what is at stake for the victim and the culpability of the contributor in question). Contributors to harm may have a duty

17. Should it be pure bad luck that you were to drive down a person on the sidewalk, you would not be to blame for it (unless one believed in moral luck). Since I do not see innocent contribution to be central to the topic under discussion, I leave out innocence and assume at least recklessness or negligence.

18. One concern that might be used to limit the duty to compensate is what it is reasonable to expect a contributor to foresee as consequences of his or her conduct. Another concern could be to what extent taking on the cost of compensation would set the compensator in a state of need.
to accept higher costs than mere bystanders. This is a salient feature of being a contributor.\textsuperscript{19} The importance of this observation with regard to our responsibility to eradicate world poverty depends on how much it would cost. If it were very costly, determining culpability would be important. But if it is true that global poverty can be eradicated at low cost, this aspect of contribution may be put to the side when considering our duty to do away with global poverty.

I would like to mention yet another morally significant feature of being a contributor, which is connected to the use of force. An individual about to be harmed may be justified in applying \textit{defensive force}. For example, a person about to be hit by your car could permissibly take preventive action against you, causing you harm in the process. This is because you—as a likely contributor to harm—are to be regarded as an aggressor against whom it is permissible to use defensive force. However, in trying to prevent your car from hitting him or her, the prospective victim must take care not to impose equal harm on innocent third parties. You are the only permissible target of such harm, and that is because in your negligence or recklessness you are about to cause someone harm.\textsuperscript{20} This observation may have disturbing consequences. If the claim that we contribute to the poverty and the death of many poor people can be substantiated, it would, according to the permissibility of using defensive force against contributors of harm, permit defensive force to be used on us. One could take it as being a \textit{reductio ad absurdum} argument against Pogge’s proposal. I do not think that we should, but shall say no more about it here.

\textbf{The Insignificance of Contribution}

In the previous section I hope I showed how being a contributor to harm matters with regard to several moral assessments. Responsibility of the people in need matters too, and significantly so. If they are responsible for the situation, the legitimacy of their claim on assistance is correspondingly weakened. If faced with a choice, we ought to save a person who, through no fault of her own, is drowning, instead of two others who are responsible for their own plight. Equally, we would be justified in attempting to save the limb of one person rather than two limbs of another, if the latter is responsible for her plight, and the former is not.

The contentious question concerns the extent to which responsibility for a situation should count when assessing the duty to assist people in severe

\textsuperscript{19} Compare Haydar, who proposes that a way ‘to distinguish an agent who has special obligation to some harm from those who do not have such obligation is that less weight should be given to the former’s appeal to cost in order to justify her not taking steps to alleviate the harm in question’ (Haydar, ‘Extreme Poverty and Global Responsibility’, p. 240).

\textsuperscript{20} To the extent that the driver is innocent, it is a question of using defensive force against innocent aggressors/threats. On the permissibility of use of such force see my ‘Self-defence among Innocent People’, \textit{Journal of Moral Philosophy} 2.2 (2005), pp. 127-46.
need. If a person you have hit while driving suffers serious injury, you ought to provide assistance. That is not in question; what is in question is whether your obligation to assist the person in severe need depends on the extent of your contribution to his or her unfortunate situation.

In order to investigate that question, let us imagine that ten metres to the left from where your negligent or reckless driving came to an end there is a second person harmed by another driver who has left the scene without coming to his or her victim's assistance. It takes you little time to realize that you are unable to help both. Which of the two injured parties, then, should you assist, and what should the criterion for the selection be?

If it is true that an agent has a particular duty to address problems to which he or she has contributed, we might find it right if the agent helped the person whose injuries he or she was responsible for. But surprisingly, I think, that is not obvious.

What seems to matter more than contribution is the severity of the injuries and urgency with which they—i.e. the two injured parties—require treatment. Severity matters because it has to do with which person is most harmed; urgency because that has to do with the window of time before the risk of serious complications becomes overwhelming. Between these two parameters trade-offs must be made. Sometimes one ought to give severity priority and sometimes urgency. However, assuming that you can only help one, not both, it seems to matter very little whether you caused the one person's injury and not the other's. The proposal, therefore, is that when people need our help, we should apply the parameters of severity and urgency when deciding who to help first, and that contribution should play no, or only a very small, part in that decision.

According to the second aspect of the principle of contribution, we could expect a contributor to have a particular strong duty to come to the aid of his or her victim, and that the duty to assist therefore would be what we could call 'victim specific'. The duty to compensate, for example, is victim specific in this sense; a contributor owes compensation to his or her victim only. We saw this in the situation where we merely bumped into someone's car. If we then learn that someone else's car has been similarly damaged, we are under no obligation to compare damage and compensate the owner of the most damaged vehicle. And this is not because it might cost us more; there is no way we should give damages owed to our victim to the other person instead. But in contrast to the duty to compensate, the duty to assist should be read as victim insensitive. Victim insensitivity implies that we should not distinguish between people we have harmed and others in need when organizing help.

That the duty to assist is victim insensitive means that we might have to deselect a victim for whose need we are to blame and concentrate instead on helping someone else because theirs is the greater need. And similarly, one might have to compensate one's victim but have to assist someone else. Regarding blame, such a distinction should not create a problem, but with
regard to compensation it could be questioned whether it is possible to distinguish between compensation and mere assistance in all relevant cases. While I do not assume it is always possible to make this distinction, I do not think it bears heavily on the arguments presented here, which mainly are about the relationship between an agent’s contribution to a situation of need and his or her duty to do away with it.

Be aware that I am not taking issue with the question of the respective strength of the duty to compensate versus the duty to assist. For instance, having destroyed something belonging to a very rich person, you ought not, it seems safe to say, to compensate a second rich person whose property suffered wider damage through the actions of another agent. Yet one may be justified in asking whether you should not take the opportunity to spend the money on assisting some of the global poor instead. The point is simply that, disregarding their respective strength, compensation is victim specific while the duty to assist is not.

**Contractual Considerations**

Inasmuch as we allow severity and urgency to play the crucial role when selecting whom to assist, would it not be unfair, one might wonder, to help people whose need we have not caused, rather than someone whose need was (partly) due to ourselves. According to the second aspect of the principle of contribution, a contributor to harm bas a primary duty to assist victims of his or her conduct and only a secondary duty to assist other needy persons. This proposal may be said to have the following correlate: a person whose need is caused by a particular agent will have a primary claim on assistance from that agent, while all others in need would enjoy only a secondary claim. Since I deny both the initial formulation and its correlate, the challenge is to explain why it is not unfair to a particular victim if a contributor assists someone else.

We might understand this point better by looking into the reasons people have for accepting a rule, which says their duty to assist should not be constrained by contribution considerations. We might first observe that when people are in need, they have an interest in being assisted, and the importance of being assisted is determined by the severity and urgency of their situation. Second, to the needy people whether the help comes from the contributor or elsewhere appears irrelevant; what they want above all is to get help. It therefore seems rational to hold that prospective assistors ought to assist according to severity and urgency (and, of course, according to the number of people in need), and not to delegate provision of assistance accord-

21. One could, of course, wonder why the duty to give away one’s money should hinge on whether or not one has ruined some property belonging to another person? To the extent that we think that a contributor should give his or her sum-of-compensation to needy starving people rather than to a rich car driver, we might perhaps better say that one ought to give the money away anyway.
ing to the giver's causal role. People therefore have good reason to agree to a rule by which we ought to assist the person(s) most in need whenever there is a conflict between giving assistance to several people in need.

People obviously want to get help when they need it. But people also want a say in how their time and resources are used for the benefit of others. They therefore have grounds to restrict how far they wish to translate the duty to help people whose need they are not responsible for. A duty to assist people at low cost does not impose a very demanding burden on people, and is accordingly to a large extent compatible with the interest of maintaining control of one's time and resources. In this sense there is a trade-off between one's interest in being helped oneself, and one's interest in managing one's own time and resources. I shall not go into this discussion here; I merely want to stress that there are grounds for setting a ceiling on how far people should be expected to go in relation to helping others. It is, nevertheless, important to observe that people have a reason for accepting a duty to assist others when the cost is reasonable, disregarding their role in bringing the need about. I therefore propose that a duty to assist people in severe need at low cost, with the criteria for selecting whom to assist as being severity and urgency, would be picked in a contractual situation in which all information—except information about prospective recipients—is available to the parties to the contract. The implementation of that rule would give everyone an increased probability of being assisted when they need it most, without doing so unfairly.

The contractual argument depends on the probability of sustaining greater or lesser harm is roughly equal across all parties. There is no reason, I believe, to assume the contrary. The probability requirement should therefore be no obstacle. We should also observe that this argument could be used to justify lower claims on assistance for people responsible for their own plight, compared with other people whose needs are no fault of their own. The former, not the latter, have increased the likelihood of needing assistance by engaging in risky behaviour.

The contractual argument lends support to the view that a contributor has no victim-specific duty to assist his or her victim: whomever one ought to assist should be decided by severity and urgency. This observation could be taken to imply that our duty to assist people in need were contribution insensitive. Be aware, however, that although the duty to assist as a consequence of one's contribution is victim insensitive, how far the duty to assist is contribution sensitive in a victim-insensitive way remains to be settled. I shall return to this option later.

Further Considerations

One way to retort to the proposal that one ought to assist according to severity and urgency and disregard contribution is to say that urgency and severity is decisive when there is a significant difference between the respective need of two persons, but as soon as there is not much difference between
them, or none at all, we should help the person whose predicament we ourselves have caused. Pogge seems at one instance to hold the view that contribution only determines whom to assist 'when what is at stake for all concerned is held constant'. But then it would not be very important to establish whether we have negative duties toward the global poor. Negative duties would only come into play in situations requiring us to differentiate, for the purpose of rendering assistance, people whose needs are equal. Moreover, I am not even sure that drawing lots to decide the issue would be impermissible in a situation in which the predicament of two people were equally desperate. When faced with a decision to help one of two people in need, one better put the question of contribution to one side and concentrate on their respective urgency and severity. Should there be no difference on these grounds, one might just as well use a randomized procedure. But even though we grant that an agent should first assist his or her victim, when severity and urgency are otherwise equal, contribution cannot be said to carry much significance.

A more interesting view would be to say that there is a point—threshold—at which the duty to assist one’s victim is outweighed by a duty to assist another. Imagine, for instance, a driver faced with a choice of acting to save one of the limbs of a person injured by himself, or saving two limbs of somebody he had not injured. It could then, according to the threshold view, be right for him to help the former. But if the latter were in danger of losing all four limbs, or his or her life, he or she should have precedence. This is a plausible view with regard to other moral features. Envisage, for instance, that we come to know that one of two persons, both needing urgent assistance, was responsible for his or her own predicament. This fact should influence our decision making, and it should not do so only in cases where injuries are indistinguishable. Of course, it is difficult to decide where to position the threshold, but that is not a sufficient reason for not preferring a threshold view rather than an everything-else-being-equal view. Let it be clear, however, that I am not defending any such threshold view as I deny the significance of contribution in cases of severe need. My proposal is that it is wrong to give preference to a particular person’s need if more than one party requires urgent attention merely because he or she is your victim.

Another objection could be phrased as follows. Imagine two people in need. While you are to blame for the predicament of the first, you are not for that of the second. You choose to save the second individual nevertheless because their injuries are more severe or urgent. By doing this you might end up owing your victim higher compensation than if you had decided to save him or her in the first place. And this observation, one could claim, indicates that you ought to assist your victim, and not spend time and resources helping someone else. In Pogge’s example, he says that by leaving the child’s needs unattended, you would greatly increase the harm you will have done.

22. Pogge, 'Real World Justice’, p. 34.
her. That might be true, and if so it could increase the compensation you owe her. But why should this observation be taken as meaning you ought to assist your victim rather than someone else? That would only be true if our concern were to ensure reparations due from you remained as low as possible. But why should that be our concern? Rather, I believe, our concern should be that the person most in need was assisted. The fact that you have contributed to someone’s need is a separate event, and does not count as a justification for not doing your duty. The need of your victim does not count as a justification as long as his or her need is less severe (or urgent) than another person’s, and merely to reduce your cost of compensation should not count as justification for anything.

At this juncture it could be objected that I have not really answered Pogge’s initial claim that by leaving the child’s need unattended, the driver has increased the harm he has done her. Because if this increase is taken to be an instance of harming, we could be faced with the unwelcome prospect of having to let people harm certain individuals, perhaps seriously, in order for them to save others from (not so very much) greater harm. And such redistribution of harm is in general not permitted. Hence, one could think, the proposal that contribution is insignificant when deciding whom to assist between the two people injured by the two different cars must be false.

One answer to this objection would simply be to acknowledge that it is permissible to impose this kind of harm on some people to save others from a greater harm. By ‘this kind of harm’, we should understand all instances in which one leaves one’s victim’s need unattended. Observe as well that to leave one’s victim unattended does not seem to fall within the pre-theoretical understanding of inflicting harm, and it is therefore at least an open question if we should take it to be an instance of harming in the first place. It seems to me that we could very well take the mere fact that we think that it is permissible to leave one’s victim unattended to save someone else from a slightly greater harm, to be an indication that we better not call it harming at all. And it should at least not be seen as a reason for thinking that since this kind of ‘harm causing’ is permissible, it is always permissible to impose serious harm on someone in order to save someone else from a greater harm. Any inference from Pogge’s example will only affect instances of harming, which is leaving one’s victim’s need unattended. And there should be no problem in accepting that.

‘No problem’ might be an exaggeration though. We should be able to say why it is the case that after injuring a particular person, we might have to let this person go unattended, causing, perhaps, the loss of a limb, in order to assist someone else whose need is greater, namely a person who is about to

23. Though we might think that a contributor choosing to assist his or her victim could be excused.

24. Unless, of course, the harming is very small, like kicking a person in the leg, and the harm one saves the other person from is considerably more serious.
lose two limbs, but that it is not, by analogy, permissible to actively cause an injury leading to the loss of a limb in order to save someone else from the loss of two. One option would be to say that it is not permissible to cause harm in order to save someone else from slightly greater harm, simply because the latter does not count as a justification for doing the former. However, when the initial harm is already a fact, the allocation of assistance is a separate event needing to be assessed on its own merits. And this is the view advocated here. We should not link the question of assistance with contribution, but rather see it as requiring an assessment of its own.

Pogge uses the term ‘intermediate duties’ to cover situations I have been discussing. Intermediate duties are supposed to stand between negative and positive duties, and are duties to protect victims of our past conduct from delayed consequences. For example, a driver who leaves a victim unattended would exacerbate the harm he had already inflicted on her. The idea behind intermediate duties is that the stringency of the negative duty not to harm people carries over to the positive duty of assisting those now in need. Intermediate duties are therefore supposed to be crucial in explaining how we, the affluent in the West, have a particular duty to address world poverty because we contribute to its persistence. I have put this view into question, and proposed that the driver in the driving accident analogy, and other contributors, when faced with decisions to distribute limited aid to these and other people in need, should give precedence to severity and urgency, and not causal role.

It could be argued that Pogge’s point is merely one about our duty to compensate the global poor, and not about our duty to assist. Pogge does not talk about the duty to assist because he believes such talk gives a wrong focus on our responsibilities. But ultimately, what is at stake is not a matter of name giving, but to clarify our duty to do away with need. My proposal is therefore that our duty to do away with need does not hinge on our relation to its cause, and I prefer to call this victim-insensitive duty to do away with need, a duty to assist.

**Contribution Reconsidered**

While I accept that a contributor to harm, rather than some bystander, is under a stronger duty to provide succour, I argue against the view that a contributor to harm has a stronger duty to prefer victims of his or her conduct when allocating assistance. At this point I want to investigate two further strategies that could be used to salvage the idea that a contributor to need has some special duty to assist.

25. To my knowledge Pogge begins to use this term in his recent ‘Real World Justice’.
26. ‘They are positive insofar as they require the agent to do something and also negative insofar as this requirement is continuous with the duty to avoid causing harm to others’ (Pogge, ‘Real World Justice’, p. 34).
The Victim-Insensitive Reading

In the first option a contributor has a stronger duty to assist a person whose predicament he has caused than what he or she would have had were it not for his or her contribution to the person's need. This counterfactual understanding of the principle of contribution may be taken to have an independent meaning. But observe that the point of comparing a contributor's duty with the duty of a bystander was exactly to evaluate the contributing aspect, which is not found among bystanders, and that the point of comparing a contributor's duty to help his or her victim rather than another needy person was to evaluate a person's duty to someone in need irrespective of causal relations. This counterfactual reading could therefore be seen as being evaluated through the two others.

All bets are not off yet, however. The appropriate understanding of the duty to assist could be taken as being victim insensitive, but sensitive nevertheless to agents' contribution to need. The correct reading of the counterfactual proposal would therefore look like this: a contributor to need is under a stronger obligation to assist persons in need than what he or she would have had were it not for his or her contribution to some need. The duty to assist is here understood to be non-directional, or victim insensitive, and hence in accordance with the previous discussion. If contributors have a stronger duty to assist people in need, due to their contribution to it, it would have to apply to all people in need without distinction.

One implication of such a victim insensitive, but contribution sensitive, duty to assist could be that a driver who had injured a person acquired a stronger duty to assist all people in need and not only his or her own victim. But is this a plausible assumption? Is it really the case that if one has contributed to a person's need then one has a stronger duty to assist other people?

Well, if someone else had to assist the contributor's victim because the contributor failed to do so, it seems fair to require that the contributor rendered assistance to a second person ending up in need, rather than letting others bear those costs as well. Fairness considerations might therefore lend support to this reading.27 Though this seems true, we should make two observations. First, we have with this account returned to considerations that hold between contributors and bystanders only. But such fairness considerations do not explain why a contributor has a stronger duty to his or her victim for the sake of the victim; he or she has a stronger duty for the sake of bystanders. And this, I believe, is not really what we are looking for. Second, such a fairness-based duty only applies provided others had to bear the cost of assisting the contributor's victim. In situations in which no one is required to expend added resources to assist the victim—imagine, for example, that the victim is out of reach of everybody—it is not clear that the contributor's duty to assist others in need would be stronger than the bystanders'.

27. I owe this proposal to Jakob Elster.
But if fairness cannot ground a victim-insensitive, but contribution-sensitive, duty to assist people in need, what could possibly do so? One could perhaps appeal to the moral wrongness of being a (negligent, reckless or intended) contributor in the first place. We could then say that a culpable contributor has to take on the burden of assisting people in need due to his or her moral deficit. By wrongly having contributed to someone's need, one would be required to make up for it by assisting someone else. There is some appeal in this proposal, but it is difficult to see why causing need, and not other moral wrongs, necessarily generates the appropriate moral deficit. And if we accept that all wrongdoing causes a moral deficit, multiplying wrongdoers' duty to assist others in need, the principle of contribution would become in CONSEQUENTIAL. Moreover, it is not at all clear whether morally deficient people in fact are subject to a particular strong duty to help the needy. Is a thief, for instance, more morally bound to assist people in need than ordinary law-abiding people? Perhaps he or she is, but if so, much stretching and bending would be needed to connect this stronger duty with the principle of contribution.

The Increased Cost Reading
Another option to salvage the moral significance of contribution for our duty to assist people in need is to focus on the increased cost contributors have to shoulder when assisting their victims, and to say that this increment is their increased duty to assist. We have already seen that a contributor has a duty to expend more to help his or her victim than may reasonably be expected of bystanders. The proposal at this point is that this increment constitutes a contributor's stronger duty to assist his or her victim. It seems odd to say, though, that a contributor has a stronger duty to assist his or her victim when this alleged stronger duty has no, or at least very little, impact on whom the contributor ought to assist. If a contributor has a stronger duty to assist a particular victim because he or she caused the victim's need, but it is also the case that the contributor should apply the criteria of severity and urgency when selecting whom to assist, and not his or her causal role, the contributor might find him or herself in a situation where he or she is morally required to divert assistance from the one he or she is most morally obliged to help, to someone else. Segregating in this manner what one ought to do from one's stronger duty seems puzzling. In support of something like it, however, Frances Kamm has proposed that 'our duty' should not be thought of as what we must do. One could accordingly say that although the stronger duty not to contribute to harm may have little or

28. I owe this proposal to Robert Huseby.
29. Is the duty to shoulder increased cost based on the mere fact of being a contributor, or is it necessary to be a culpable contributor? It seems at least plausible to assume that the duty will be affected by culpability, and not merely one's causal role.
no implication for what we ought to do with regard to assisting needy people when we in fact contribute to a particular person’s need, we do have a stronger duty to address needs which we ourselves have caused. I am not sure whether this proposal is very promising. If the good generated by two different acts was equal, and the burden of performing them was equal as well, one should believe that one would have to perform one’s (stronger) duty. If not, we lose sight of what it means to have a duty.

Disregarding whether or not we regard contributors’ duty to shoulder costs as constituting their stronger duty to assist, we could again ask whether this duty applies to their particular victims only. In other words, is the duty to bear costs victim specific? Imagine that a contributor is unable to assist his or her victim, but is in a position to help someone else in equal need. Would this contributor have a stronger duty than a bystander to shoulder added costs? Envisage, for example, a driver who gets out of his car and observes that he cannot assist his own victim but another person in need. Is the driver under a duty to expend the same resources on this second individual as he owes the victim of his own careless driving, or is he to be considered a mere bystander with regard to this duty? Whatever we think about this, we should once again observe that it is difficult to see what difference contribution ultimately would have in such a victim-insensitive duty to shoulder cost. If the duty to bear costs were increased by being a contributor to need, all wrongdoers would be liable to bear costs, and being a contributor to a particular kind of need would make no difference.

As it seems difficult to find a general reason for identifying a stronger victim-insensitive duty on part of contributors to need, I conclude this section by observing that we have reasons to suspect that the duty to assist people in need is not only victim insensitive but contribution insensitive as well. That is, the duty to assist is contribution insensitive with the proviso that a contributor owes it to bystanders to assist victims of his or her own actions, and if someone else has already done so, the contributor is under an obligation to assist any subsequent person in need.

**Concluding Remarks**

I have argued that the moral significance of having contributed to harm is not what matters when deciding whether to assist needy people. This implies that I deny the second aspect of the principle of contribution, and, accordingly, that a contributor to harm should be seen to have no stronger duty to

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31. A vexed situation arises if a contributor could save his or her victim at little cost, or another person in more severe need at considerably higher cost, and the contributor would have had a duty to assist his or her victim at such cost but not people to which harm he or she has not contributed.

32. If one wants to relate the duty to shoulder increased cost with another significant feature of being a contributor, it might seem more promising to connect it with the duty to compensate rather than with the duty to assist. I shall not pursue that option here.
assist those who are victims of his or her conduct, rather than to assist some other needy people. So although we should be able to make sense of the claim that we contribute to the poverty of the poor in a way that conveys some of the intuitive power of the impermissibility of not harming others, we could do just as well without this idea when arguing for our responsibilities to the very poor.

It may be permissible, Kamm suggests, to discharge one’s duties by performing supererogatory acts.\(^\text{33}\) Accordingly, we could say that assisting a person whose need has no causal relationship with ourselves would be supererogatory, but that it would be permissible to do so rather than assisting a person we had harmed as long as it promoted equal or more good. Yet, it would still be the case that the only way we could discharge our duties to the needy would be by assisting some people in need. This view seems to sit well with the observation made above, namely that people have a mutual interest in having a rule dictating that one save those most in need. But it fails in the sense that it sees the assisting of the more needy as supererogatory. I have argued that deciding whom to assist comes with a duty to consider severity and urgency, not simply with an opportunity to do so.

The idea is that our responsibility to render assistance obtains whether or not we have caused the problem in the first place. Though contribution is tied to compensation, the issue of assistance in cases of severe need should be evaluated on its own merit. If this is correct, contribution is not the right parameter to be singled out when arguing for our duty to assist the global poor. Although relevant for questions of blame, compensation, the duty to bear higher costs when assisting, permissible use of defensive force, and a fair distribution of the cost of assistance, contribution carries little momentum when assessing our duty to assist people in severe need if we can do so at little cost.\(^\text{34}\)

\(^\text{33}\) We might, for example, imagine someone having a duty to meet a particular person for lunch because she promised to do so. On her way, she sees someone dying of kidney failure. She is willing to give him her kidney. According to Kamm, it is wrong in this case to say that the supererogatory aiding may not take precedence over the duty. See Frances M. Kamm, ‘Rescue and Harm: Discussion of Peter Unger’s Living High and Letting Die’, Legal Theory 5 (1999), pp. 1-44 (21).

\(^\text{34}\) Are there tactical reasons for alluding to contribution when arguing for our duties to help protect the global poor? Well, there might be because people could have a wrong understanding of what our duties are. But it might also be the case that people could come to be lost in arguments about whether or not we indeed contribute to world poverty, and those who are not convinced that we do could falsely conclude that we have no duties to assist its victims. Moreover, it is an open question whether it is wise to give people reason to maintain their false beliefs about the moral significance of contribution with regard to our duty to assist the severely deprived.