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978-0-521-88519-5 - Ethics of Global Development: Agency, Capability, and Deliberative Democracy

David A. Crocker

Excerpt

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## 1 Introduction

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Poverty, degrading inequality, violence, environmental crises, and tyranny continue to afflict the world. In spite of humankind's efforts, these five interrelated scourges are in many places more rather than less pronounced than they were a decade ago. Even in rich countries, poverty and inequality have increased. Efforts to understand and reduce these scourges have taken many forms. Moral reflection on the ends and means of "development," where "development" most generically means beneficial societal change, is one important effort. Such moral reflection, which includes the assessment of the present and the envisioning of better futures, increasingly is called "international development ethics" or the "ethics of global development."<sup>1</sup>

This volume is a work in global development ethics. It explains, justifies, applies, and extends ethical reflection on development goals, policies, projects, and institutions from the local to the global level.<sup>2</sup> The volume is a new statement of my views on development ethics, the capability approach, and deliberative democracy. Throughout, my aim is to move development ethics and the capability approach forward by working out and defending an *agency-focused* version of capability ethics and applying it to the issues of consumption, hunger, governance, and globalization. Although at least portions of seven chapters appeared as earlier versions, I have revised – often radically – each of them to take account of recent literature, reflect changes in my thinking over the last fifteen years, respond to criticism of earlier work, and yield what I hope is a new and harmonious totality.

Central to each of the book's four parts and eleven chapters is my sympathetic and, at times, critical engagement with Amartya Sen's "capability" approach to international development.<sup>3</sup> Since my first encounter with Sen's thought in the mid-1970s, I have increasingly come to recognize, as Hilary Putnam puts it, "the importance of what [Sen] calls the 'capabilities' approach to welfare economics to perhaps the greatest problem facing humanity in our time, the problem of the immense disparities between richer and poorer parts of the globe."<sup>4</sup>

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Putnam continues: “At the heart of that [capabilities] approach is the realization that issues of development economics and issues of ethical theory simply cannot be kept apart.” The following pages will show that Sen’s linking of economics and ethics – and more generally of development studies and ethics – has inspired and stimulated me at each step in my own work in development ethics. My agency-oriented perspective is an effort to build on, make explicit, and strengthen Sen’s recent turn to the ideals of public discussion and democratic participation as integral to freedom-enhancing development.

Much of my work since 1990 also has been a response to Martha Nussbaum’s articles and books on development and development ethics.<sup>5</sup> Initially more sympathetic to Nussbaum’s version of the capability approach than I am now, throughout the present book I will note the increasing differences between Sen’s and Nussbaum’s versions and develop a perspective that, while closer to Sen’s, seeks to do justice to both versions. The most important of these differences, as I shall argue in Parts II and III, concerns Nussbaum’s proposal of a list of the ingredients in human flourishing and Sen’s qualified rejection of such a list in favor of a stronger role, than Nussbaum permits, for democratic decision. To mark differences between Sen’s and Nussbaum’s theories and for reasons that will become clear subsequently, I will follow development scholar Des Gasper and refer to Sen’s theory as the *capability approach*, Nussbaum’s perspective as the *capabilities approach*, and the family of approaches as the *capability orientation*.<sup>6</sup>

To introduce the book as a whole, in this introductory chapter I weave together my own intellectual journey, what I understand to be the evolving stages of development ethics, and the rationale for the volume’s four Parts and ten remaining chapters. Other development ethicists, such as Sabina Alkire, Nigel Dower, Jay Drydyk, Des Gasper, Denis Goulet, Martha Nussbaum, Onora O’Neill, and Stephen Schwenke would tell different personal stories and provide somewhat different accounts of the evolution of development ethics. My personal trajectory is only one of the ways development ethics has evolved. For example, some development ethicists have not engaged Sen’s capability approach or have done so in ways that differ from my own.

### **Toward development ethics**

In the spring of 1978, two Colorado State University colleagues, an economist and an historian, paid me an office visit that was to redirect my professional life.<sup>7</sup> I had been teaching for twelve years in the Department of Philosophy at Colorado State University, my first position

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out of graduate school. The two colleagues came with good news and bad news.

The good news was that they had just received a two-year grant from the US Department of Education to establish a MA program in Comparative Rural Development, and that program was to include a graduate seminar in “Ethics and Rural Development.” The course was to treat the moral and value issues that emerge in Colorado’s impoverished rural and mountain towns as well as in CSU’s overseas projects in international rural development.<sup>8</sup>

The bad news was that these colleagues wanted *me* to teach the course. Although flattered by the offer and attracted by the promise of a stipend, I responded incredulously. “You’ve got the wrong guy.” I knew nothing, I said, of rural life and mountain towns (except ski towns like Steamboat Springs). And my experience in the developing world was limited to a year in the early 1960s working with impoverished youth in Cleveland’s inner city and to a whirlwind family vacation in the early 1970s to Guaymas, Mexico. Specializing in philosophical ethics, metaethics, and Anglo-American and European social-political philosophy hardly qualified me to teach the course they proposed. My intellectual interests focused on the theories of justice of John Rawls and Robert Nozick, the social theory of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, and the Yugoslav Praxis Group’s vision of democratic and market socialism.<sup>9</sup> What did such philosophical views have to do with rural development – whatever that was – at home or abroad or with what were then dubbed “Third World” issues? I had my hands full trying to contribute to a dialogue between Anglo-American and European social philosophy.

My two colleagues, however, persisted. “Don’t worry (about your qualifications); you will team-teach the course with two other CSU professors – an expert on India, who for several years has lived in India and Iran, and a professor of animal science, who has USAID-funded projects throughout the developing world.”<sup>10</sup> And, they continued, the need is great among both graduate students and their professors to address value and ethical questions. Faculty and students learn much about the science of development, such as the causes and effects of poverty, and they acquire the technical skills to install tube wells in Pakistan, set up credit unions in Nicaragua, or generate employment opportunities on Colorado’s western slope. But once on the job, a host of questions assail them for which they are ill prepared and have no ready answer: Am I doing more harm than good? What counts as harm and what counts as good? How much truth should I tell my funding agency, especially when they don’t want to hear it? Should I challenge my host

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country's gender inequality or take refuge in "moral relativism?" Is my "development" work contributing to a tyranny's legitimacy or to excessive US influence? How should we define development and how should we try to promote it? Who should answer these questions, what methods should they use, and what should they say?

Still with misgivings, I accepted. The questions *were* important, and I might learn something. I would like to think that I also was disturbed that the world was beset by problems of deprivation and misery that moral reflection might help resolve. During an internship as a youth and community worker in Cleveland's inner city in 1961–2, I had learned that local action coupled with governmental policy could make a difference – for good or ill – in people's lives.

When we three co-teachers met to plan the new course, chaos ensued. The professor of animal science didn't know what ethics had to do with (rural) development and improvement of cattle strains in Bulgaria. The scholar of Indian and Persian culture was worried about Northern and Western ethnocentrism. I couldn't figure out what Rawls's argument from the abstract and hypothetical standpoint of the "original position" had to do with practical ethics or with "development." And what, I asked myself, was "development" anyway? Writings in development economics or development policy scarcely mentioned ethics. The philosophers I admired never talked about development. Given the abstract, otherworldly way in which even applied ethics and sociopolitical philosophy was done in those days, this state of affairs was probably a good thing.

Only when the three of us discovered the work of development scholar and activist Denis Goulet and of sociologist Peter Berger did we begin to get some help on how we might proceed in our course. In different ways, both Goulet and Berger argued that ethics should be put on the development agenda – both for the sake of better development and for the sake of ethics.<sup>11</sup>

Since the early 1960s, Goulet – influenced by French economist Louis-Joseph Lebreton and development economists such as Bernard Higgins, Albert Hirschman, and Gunnar Myrdal – had argued that "development needs to be redefined, demystified, and thrust into the arena of moral debate."<sup>12</sup> Drawing on his training in continental philosophy, political science, and social planning as well as on his extensive grassroots experience in poor countries, Goulet – we discovered – was a pioneer in addressing "the ethical and value questions posed by development theory, planning, and practice."<sup>13</sup> One of the most important lessons we learned from Goulet, in such studies as *The Cruel Choice: A New Concept in the Theory of Development* (1971), is that so-called "development," because of its costs in human suffering and loss

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of meaning, can amount to “anti-development.” Similarly in the book *Pyramids of Sacrifice* (1974), a book that some of our Colorado State “development” colleagues had read, Peter Berger argued that so-called “development” often sacrificed rather than benefited poor people and what was urgently needed was a marriage of political ethics and social change in the “Third World”:

This book deals with two topics that are intertwined throughout. One is Third World Development. The other is political ethics applied to social change. It seems to me that these two topics belong together. No humanly acceptable discussion of the anguishing problems of the world’s poverty can avoid ethical considerations. And no political ethics worthy of the name can avoid the centrally important case of the Third World.<sup>14</sup>

With Goulet’s and Berger’s texts central to our planning and initial syllabus, we had valuable resources for getting ethics onto the agenda of development practitioners and policy analysts. But did philosophical ethics and sociopolitical philosophy have anything to contribute to “ethics and rural development” or – as we soon called it – “ethics and international development” or “development ethics”?

In the 1970s three currents of Anglo-American philosophy appeared promising for our work: John Rawls’s theory of justice; Peter Singer’s challenging argument that the affluent had a duty to aid famine victims, and the lifeboat ethics debate.

The moral problem of world hunger and the ethics of famine relief were among the first practical issues that philosophers tackled after John Rawls’s pivotal 1971 study, *A Theory of Justice*,<sup>15</sup> convinced them that reflection on normative issues should be part of the philosopher’s task. Although Rawls himself limited ethical analysis to abstract principles of distributive justice, applied philosophers addressed the ethical and conceptual aspects of a variety of practical problems and policies. In the same year that Rawls’s volume appeared, Peter Singer first wrote about famine in East Bengal (now Bangladesh)<sup>16</sup> and, more generally, about “the obligations of the affluent to those in danger of starvation.”<sup>17</sup> In his 1974 *New York Times Magazine* article, “Philosophers are Back on the Job,”<sup>18</sup> Singer championed the philosophical turn to applied ethics, employing the ethics of famine relief as a leading example.

Philosophers were back on the job because, as John Dewey had urged fifty years earlier in a statement that functions as one of this volume’s epigraphs, “philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men.”<sup>19</sup> One of these human problems in the mid-1970s was whether or not

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affluent countries and their citizens were in any way morally obligated to send food to famine victims in other countries. Is such aid morally required, admirable but not obligatory, or impermissible? For instance, the editors of a widely used anthology asked, "What moral responsibility do affluent nations (or those people in them) have to the starving masses?"<sup>20</sup> Peter Singer argued that such aid was obligatory and rich people commit moral wrong in refusing or neglecting to aid the starving poor. For, he asserted, "suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad" and "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it."<sup>21</sup> Finally, claiming that life-saving and suffering-reducing actions are indeed in our power, Singer concluded that famine relief is a moral obligation or duty and not a mere matter of charity. Even though such a duty might be at odds with our moral judgments and complacent consumption practices, we do grievous wrong in not donating to famine relief.

Garrett Hardin, writing in 1974 in *Psychology Today* magazine, likewise argued against charitable aid.<sup>22</sup> While Singer argued that moral duty, rather than charity, should be the basis for aid, Hardin argued that rich nations and individuals (living in lifeboats) have a duty *not* to help the needy (swimming in the sea). Aid would only worsen the problems of hunger, because it would result in more mouths to feed, and would cause other countries to become dependent on handouts rather than solving their own food and population problems.

Throughout the 1970s (and on into the 1980s), often in response to Singer, on the one hand, and Hardin, on the other, many philosophers investigated whether there exists a positive moral obligation to aid distant and hungry people and, if so, what are its nature, justification, and limits.<sup>23</sup>

As we three CSU professors planned and then taught the nation's (and perhaps the world's) first philosophy course in "ethics and development," we took full advantage of the Hardin–Singer debate and the philosophical discussion it had provoked. Something, however, was missing in this literature. Only gradually did we come to recognize that it was important to recast and enlarge this initial moral problematic. Preoccupied as they were with the task of justifying aid to distant people, philosophers paid scant attention to institutional and practical issues. In particular they almost totally ignored what happened to famine relief donations or food aid once they arrived in a stricken country. Did it go to the rich instead of its intended starving recipients? Did food aid glut the national and local markets with the result that food prices fell and local farmers suffered? Was food aid a cause of anti-development in rural

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areas, perhaps blinding donors to structural injustice that caused the famine in the first place? Were foreign governmental aid agencies, such as USAID, or national programs of poverty alleviation more effective in reducing hunger than private donations to international NGOs? What role might different kinds of food aid have – in contrast to, say, different sorts of population control or agricultural development – in national efforts to reduce chronic deprivation and wrenching inequality? Do outside private and governmental aid sap a poor country's commitment and initiative to confront its problems of hunger and other deprivations?

It is true that Singer in his 1972 essay, and even more in later writings, made clear that what rich countries and individuals were obligated to do was to give that type of aid that was most likely to reduce starvation and death. Although in his initial essay Singer emphasized private donations to international NGOs such as the Bengal Relief Fund, he also stated that effective hunger-reducing action occurred “either through orthodox methods of famine relief or through population control or both.”<sup>24</sup> In a 1977 “Postscript” to the initial article, which we used as a text in our CSU class, Singer conceded that if he were to rewrite the initial article, he would have emphasized – as means of reducing hunger – that international donors should require recipient governments to check population growth by such means as dispensing contraceptives and even performing sterilizations. In the same essay, Singer also mentions that a family's economic security might be a factor in reducing the number of children, and this consideration prompts him to reflect further on how he would have rewritten his initial essay:

One other matter that I should now put forward slightly differently is that my argument does, of course, apply to assistance with development, particularly agricultural development, as well as to direct famine relief. Indeed, I think the former is usually the better long-term investment. Although this was my view when I wrote the article, the fact that I started from a famine situation, where the need was for immediate food, has led some readers to suppose that the argument is only about giving food and not about other types of aid. This is quite mistaken, and my view is that the aid should be of whatever type is most effective.<sup>25</sup>

We three CSU professors did miss or at least failed to appreciate Singer's qualifications and his central point that rich nations and people had an obligation to help the global poor in the most effective way or ways possible. Even in my 1996 critique of Singer, I failed to acknowledge that, for Singer, what was most important was rich donor obligation, and that he was open to various ways in which individuals could fulfill that obligation.<sup>26</sup> Claiming no expertise in whether other types of aid are “better or worse than giving to Oxfam,”<sup>27</sup> Singer has more recently



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insisted, correctly I now believe, that critics are wrong in criticizing him for relying exclusively on private donations: “We should do our best to find out what will produce the best outcome, whether it is giving money, buying fair trade products, voting, joining an organization, or all of those things. Then we should do it.”<sup>28</sup>

Singer was right that what was needed – and what philosophers and other ethicists could contribute – was an ethics of aid, and that private donations of money and food could play a role. But my two CSU colleagues and I gradually came to see that such an ethic would be only one part of an ethics of and for national and local development. Singer had framed the issue in an incomplete way and one with potentially negative consequences for international development. We began to see four ways in which we should build on but go beyond Singer.

First, except for a few remarks about how certain kinds of population control might contribute to the relief of hunger and other deprivations, Singer did not – and still does not – investigate the nature and relative effectiveness of actual policies, whether of Oxfam-type famine relief, population control, or development assistance. Practitioners and policy analysts have a variety of approaches to each of these policies, but there is little in Singer to suggest these controversies or to take a position on them. We three professors designed our course to enable our students to understand and assess such diverse ends and means of international development as economic growth, growth with equity, and basic needs.

Second, Singer’s focus was almost entirely on rich countries and their citizens and very minimally on what poor nations – their governments and civil societies – were doing or failing to do to solve their own problems. We became increasingly convinced that the question of international aid and responsibilities depended to a large extent on how national development was conceived and what developing nations were already doing (or failing to do) to bring about good or better development. Each country and region has a history of efforts to define and implement good development, and we believed it was important to understand and evaluate these endeavors before we could advocate some form of international assistance. Important examples would be Sen’s book on famines<sup>29</sup> and Jean Drèze and Sen’s analysis and evaluation of national efforts to combat hunger,<sup>30</sup> volumes that appeared before at least some of Singer’s writing on the ethics of combating hunger. Singer, of course, could say that such an investigation of national and local development efforts is permitted and even encouraged by investigating the most effective means to remedy deprivation. The fact that he, as a philosopher, did not investigate various national development efforts



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did not mean that nonphilosophers could not and should not do so. In contrast, we CSU professors and later development ethicists came to believe that ethicists – whether or not philosophers – should not stand aloof from institutional and policy analysis but should be part of interdisciplinary efforts to understand, assess, and improve national and local development.

Third, Singer's way of framing the ethics of food aid (and, more generally, the ethics of reducing deprivation in poor countries) emphasized that it was affluent countries and individuals who should be the agents in combating hunger and that poor governments and their citizens were but passive recipients. Singer, of course, could say that to the extent that national and local efforts in poor countries successfully relieved suffering, external agents should keep their hands off or find ways to help national agents become more effective. This response, however, converts the moral issue into a strategic one. In addition to the moral importance of the "best outcome" (with respect to preference satisfaction or relief of suffering), it is also crucial, we came to believe, to address the process by which the outcome is attained. Although in the late 1970s we did not have a clear grasp of the language of agency, with the help of thinkers like Denis Goulet and Paolo Freire we were aware that it was important that – where feasible – poor countries develop themselves rather than be the grateful or even deserving recipients of the actions of others. Although failing to recognize the complexity of Singer's argument, Andrew Kuper sees this weakness in Singer's approach: Singer has a "tendency to treat active individuals in developing countries almost wholly as recipients or moral patients. Poor people are neither powerless nor ignorant in respect of important problems and opportunities for action; they need to be addressed as agents, capable of independent action as well as cooperative assistance."<sup>31</sup>

Fourth, related to the last point, that what Goulet called "assistentialism" risked disrespecting and weakening the agency of the poor, we three CSU professors also worried that hunger, as terrible as it was, was not only bad in itself but was a symptom of deeper, more structural problems, such as maldistribution of wealth and power.<sup>32</sup> As important as it was to relieve immediate suffering, it was also crucial for development ethics to criticize current institutional arrangements and to offer better alternatives. Even worse, in fulfilling obligations to alleviate immediate and individual misery, international donors and national agencies might inadvertently and even intentionally maintain a remediable system responsible for great deprivation. This is not to say that no famine relief of individuals is justified, but it is to warn that the good that comes from

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palliative remedies must be supplemented and sometimes outweighed by the greater good that comes from systemic change.<sup>33</sup> In Chapter 8, I return to these issues and work out in detail an agency-based and systemic capability approach to world hunger and other deprivations.

In summary, taking seriously Singer's challenge that outsiders can and should help the global poor, in planning our course we sought to go beyond Singer and think through the policies and practices by which outsiders could help poor people relieve their own suffering, develop themselves, and improve their own institutions. There would be (and still is) much work to do before development would be part of the philosophical and ethical agenda the way that environment and animal welfare were beginning to be. We were, however, forging a vision about what our course and development ethics might be.<sup>34</sup> We were less concerned than Singer with foundational issues and more committed than Singer to an ethics that was interdisciplinary, institutionally and empirically informed, and policy-relevant.<sup>35</sup>

Still harboring doubts that we could bring development and (philosophical) ethics into fruitful interaction, we launched our new graduate course – jointly listed in the curricular offerings of the Department of Philosophy and of International Education – in the fall of 1978. We put ethics explicitly on the agenda of development policy and practice by inviting CSU professors who had worked with development projects to describe to the class moral dilemmas they had confronted. After doing so, the guest lecturers then challenged the students (and faculty) to try to resolve the quandary, told what in fact they (the visiting professors) actually did, and led a discussion of whether they had done the right thing. An engineering professor recounted his failed efforts to get USAID to change its policy of sending more food aid than a nation could absorb and the related failure of the nation itself to keep food prices sufficiently high to enable local farmers to make a profit. An agricultural economics professor told of his worries, when working on credit unions in Nicaragua in the 1970s, that he was lending credibility to the Somoza dictatorship. Should he continue building credit unions that Nicaragua would need in any regime or should he resign and support the Sandinistas? I would later describe these and other practitioner moral dilemmas in articles in *Revista de Filosofía de la Universidad de Costa Rica* and *World Development* in 1987 and 1991, respectively.<sup>36</sup>

In the same articles, I tried to capture our commitments – strengthened by the course itself – to put ethics on the development agenda. What was called for, I argued, was something more than foundational defenses of doing the right thing or the generation of a professional code of ethics