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## Behind the Seams: Individual Responsibility & Global Poverty

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**Behind the Seams:  
Individual Responsibility & Global Poverty**

**by**

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**Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of**

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the Upper Division Honors Program.**

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## **I. Introduction: Pogge's Argument Against Global Poverty**

In a world of seven billion people, more than three billion live on less than \$2.50 a day.<sup>1</sup> These three billion people are below an extreme poverty threshold, unable to purchase enough food to maintain a proper intake of calories. For comparison, the poverty threshold in the United States for one person, or the highest income which is considered impoverished, is about \$32 a day.<sup>2</sup> This figure for poverty provides for the ability to purchase a few more necessities, such as housing. Global poverty keeps almost half of the world living on dollars and dimes; survival is the primary focus for those who live on such meager means. 22,000 children under the age of five die from poverty-related causes every single day.<sup>3</sup> Of the children who live through this horrifying poverty, 72 million are not in primary school.<sup>4</sup> Without education, many of these children are doomed to dangerous and underpaid work, trapping them in a cycle of poverty.

The cycle of poverty plagues the societies of the most impoverished and of the wealthiest. Poor infrastructure exacerbates many of the problems. Over 1.1 billion people lack adequate access to water and 2.6 billion lack access to basic sanitation, in addition to the total inadequacy of health care in developing countries.<sup>5</sup> The poor who are not simply trapped in impoverished communities with terrible infrastructures are often unable to purchase resources from their area. The complete lack of purchasing power for the poor is evident in comparison to the consumption of the wealthiest. The poorest fifth of the world consumes only 1.5% of goods

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<sup>1</sup> Shaohua Chen and Martin Ravallion. "The developing world is poorer than we thought, but no less successful in the fight against poverty." World Bank, August 2008. Web. 24 March 2012.

<sup>2</sup> <http://go.worldbank.org/5V41Z1WRL0/>  
<sup>2</sup> <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/threshld/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> Shah, Anup. "Today, around 21,000 children died around the world." Global Issues. 2011. Web. 24 March 2012.  
<<http://www.globalissues.org/article/715/today-21000-children-died-around-the-world>>.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations. "Millennium Development Goals Report." 2007. Web. 24 March 2012.  
<<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/mdg2007.pdf>>.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations. "Human Development Report." 2006. pp.6, 7, 35 Web. 24 March 2012.  
<<http://hdr.undp.org/hdr2006/>>.

privately consumed; the wealthiest fifth of the world consume 76.6% of these goods.<sup>6</sup> This shines a small light on the large disparities in wealth and quality of life between the poor and the rich. The poor of the world are not simply a little less wealthy; they live in drastically worse conditions on much, much less money.

All of this raises questions of fairness for those in wealthy countries. What justifies persons in wealthy countries to have access or use resources that poor persons in developing countries cannot have or use? Do the wealthy have these resources through just means, and are they entitled to continue to use these resources? What structures protect the status quo, and are they just? The struggle to answer these questions and address this staggering poverty is both complex and heated. Although usually united by a common goal, people fighting to end poverty often present conflicting views stating vastly different causes for poverty. Because poverty affects and is affected by income, education, debt, health care, infrastructure, and agriculture, as well as other factors, it is no surprise that the solutions are complicated.

Despite the difficulty and complexity of poverty responses, the one thing made clear by these horrifying statistics is that there are serious problems to be solved. Thomas Pogge has articulated a far-reaching and robust theory of global poverty and justice that nevertheless aspires to be as uncontroversial as possible. Pogge places both the responsibility for causing and ending global poverty in the hands of every citizen of any wealthy nation. In this thesis, I will explain Pogge's theory, as well as the features which make it particularly attractive and those which possibly damage it. I hope to take the attractive features of his theory and use them in a new theory which avoids some of the same concerns and pitfalls to which his articulation of

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<sup>6</sup> World Bank's Development Economics Vice Presidency, Development Data Group. "World Development Indicators." 2008. Web. 24 March 2012. < <http://data.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/wdi08.pdf>>.

responsibility is vulnerable. Avoiding the problem of whether or not Pogge's theory can survive these criticisms, I will establish a negative duty in an individual and smaller setting.

The defining feature of Pogge's account is his claim that the obligations of global distributive justice arise from a negative duty. Negative duties are those moral duties that require us to refrain from performing certain actions. They are opposed to positive duties, which are simply duties to perform certain actions. For example, the obligation not to lie is a negative duty. Once an agent has told a lie, he has violated a negative duty. This violation creates obligations for the agent to stop or rectify the harm which has caused. Obligations of charity, on the other hand, are positive duties. They do not indicate any harm done by the agent, but require something of the agent regardless of harm.

The most well-known account of our obligation to the global poor, an account that conceives of this obligation as a positive duty, is expressed in Peter Singer's 1972 essay, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." There, Singer argues that citizens of the developed world have extremely far-reaching obligations to give to the global poor up to the point of which their charity would actually create more suffering than it would alleviate. Such a conclusion is rooted in the principle "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>7</sup> This principle expressed a positive duty to rescue those in need. It does not place the blame on those who see bad occurring for causing it; it does not even necessarily point to a specific cause of badness that is a moral wrong. Singer believed that the uncontroversial nature of this claim would allow him to build a theory of helping the poor on the basis that, in most cases, individuals could help the poor without becoming impoverished themselves. The argument, however, is

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<sup>7</sup> Singer, Peter. "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1.3 (1972): 229-43. *JSTOR*. Web. 24 Mar. 2012.

extremely controversial. Many do not think that people are obligated to sacrifice what they had earned to right wrongs they had not caused. Others who did not disagree with his obligation to stop something bad from happening disagreed with what was of comparable moral importance. His argument, which uses one powerful premise, was extremely controversial for the incredible demands it made on people who had seemingly done nothing to bring these obligations. At least part of the problem here is Singer's claim that duties of global justice are positive duties. Such duties are often thought to be more controversial because they demand the performance of certain kinds of actions rather than simply refraining from acting in harmful ways.

Pogge's theory is importantly different. Like Singer, Pogge thinks that citizens of developed nations have a reasonably robust moral obligation to aid the global poor, although his obligation pales in comparison to Singer's radical demands. What makes Pogge's account less controversial is not just his claim that the obligation is weaker, but also his insistence that it arises out of a negative duty not to harm. Pogge claims that most global poverty is caused by the global order imposed by the wealthy nations and their citizens. The global order, according to Pogge, includes large intergovernmental bodies such as the World Trade Organization, as well as trade agreements and treaties between countries. Because the global order created this poverty, citizens of wealthy nations have violated a negative duty not to harm. By outlining poverty as a violation of a negative duty, Pogge has effectively avoided many of the problems of a claim like Singer's. People understand the positive duty of assisting the poor in drastically different ways. When poverty arises from violating a negative duty, one can look to the duty which has been violated and from it craft specific obligations of retribution from the offending individuals. These obligations are much more specific than the general idea of helping and provide a much clearer picture of what should be given to the poor because they are based directly on a specific harm. A

negative duty also holds much more strongly in a variety of different ethical theories. It might be complicated to defend the level of sacrifice necessary for some poverty solutions if an individual is merely helping someone who has suffered a misfortune. When the individual is making reparations for the poverty he has inflicted, it is much easier to demand a higher sacrifice of the individual. A systematic look at harms and resulting obligations creates a theory which demands this increased sacrifice.

Thomas Pogge has crafted a theory which provides both a framework for explaining poverty and a plan for solving it. He argues that global institutions are set up in such a way as to oppress the poor, causing them harm. This shifts the debate away from mere ways to assist the poor towards ways to stop and repair the damage caused. Thus, members of these global institutions do not just have an obligation to help those who are in need, but instead to offer retributive justice to those they have harmed. The moral obligation to fix these institutions and eliminate poverty falls not collectively, but rather individually on every member of affluent societies who participate in and uphold these global organizations. Pogge's argument is unique in its suggestion that poverty is a harm caused by others, not simply by uncontrollable environmental factors. It implicates individuals in affluent nations not only as those who should work to end poverty, but as those who cause and are complicit in it.

To show that poverty has been inflicted, the situation of the poor must meet ten criteria. The first five focus on defining harmful poverty, the next three focus on defining what constitutes causation from global institutions, and the last two address issues relating to historical wrongs. The first condition is that the poor must be poor in absolute terms. Pogge does not want to declare as poverty what is merely an income gap; he is clear that poverty includes objectively harmful standards of living. This kind of poverty is measurable in both the miniscule income of



the global poor and the very few resources the poor can obtain. The second condition is that the poor must also be poor in relative terms. For there to be injustice, the poor cannot indicate a group which is just slightly disadvantaged from the rest of the society. A large gap must exist between the poor and wealthy to indicate that the disparity is not merely a result of normal differences in incomes. Pogge's third condition is that the inequality is impervious. The poor must be virtually trapped in their poverty and the rich completely secure from that kind of poverty. The inequality must also be pervasive, as the fourth condition states. Pogge clarifies that the poverty cannot merely affect one aspect of life, but almost all aspects of life, to distinguish this condition from the first. The fifth and perhaps most controversial condition is that the inequality must be avoidable. For a failure to help to be harmful, the better-off must be able to lift the poor out of poverty without throwing themselves into abject poverty as well. These criteria form the basis for some of Pogge's most important claims about responsibility. He does not want mere income differences or poverty in one area to create the strong obligations for which he argues. He also does not want to create strong obligations where the better-off help the poor only to end up as the new poor, and become another suffering group of human beings. These criteria serve to show that the poverty must be severe enough to be classified as a harm for which someone could be held accountable.

After establishing the criteria for harmful poverty, Pogge establishes three criteria for this harm to have been caused by global institutions. The first is that there exists a shared global order which is set-up and controlled by the better-off and imposed on the worse-off. The second is that this order must be perpetuating or creating conditions of radical inequality despite there being other alternative structures which would not support inequality. Pogge's argument is not necessarily calling for new global organizations, but rather for new policies in these

organizations. The final criterion is that the inequality cannot be traced to any “extra-social factors”<sup>8</sup> such as natural disasters. These criteria illustrate Pogge’s claim that the responsibility stems from what he believes are unjust policies forced upon the poor by the wealthy.

The final two conditions which indicate harm are historical. The first is that the better-off have better access and consume much more of the earth’s resources than the poor do, without compensating the poor. This reveals part of Pogge’s definition of harm. The better-off harm the poor through their immense consumption because they leave less for the poor to consume and makes resources more expensive to access. The second criterion is that the “social starting positions of the worse-off and the better-off have emerged from a single historical process that was pervaded by massive, grievous wrongs.”<sup>9</sup> Pogge here wants to establish the idea that radical inequality does not originate out of fair and equal treatment. If it did, he would exempt the well-off from the burdens of responsibility. Pogge does not otherwise explicitly claim that the well-off are responsible for the wrongs of their forefathers, but this criterion makes it clear that the well-off do carry some burden because of those wrongs.

Pogge then takes the ten criteria to create a structured argument. He argues that if the first criterion for institutions is met, that there are global institutions created and controlled by the wealthy and imposed on the poor, and all five of the conditions of radical inequality are present, the shared global order is “*prima facie* unjust and requires justification.”<sup>10</sup> If the global order does not meet any of the other two criteria for institutions or historical criteria, it can be justified. However, if it does not, it cannot be justified. Pogge argues that the current global order fulfills all ten criteria and cannot be justified.

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<sup>8</sup> Pogge, Thomas. World Poverty and Human Rights. Malden: Blackwell, 2002. p. 199. Hereafter referred to as “WPHR.”

<sup>9</sup> WPHR p. 203

<sup>10</sup> WPHR p. 209

What moral obligation do we have because the current global order is unjust? Pogge argues that as members of the well-off imposing the global order, we are responsible for its injustice. He says, “Insofar as advantaged and influential participants in the present international order grant the argument, we acknowledge our shared responsibility for its injustice. We are violating a negative duty of justice insofar as we contribute to (and fail to mitigate) the harms it reproduces and insofar as we resist suitable reforms.”<sup>11</sup> Pogge’s claim might seem to be a fairly weak one, where we fulfill our obligation simply by asking for a few global reforms. However, he proposes a complicated solution which would require a great deal of commitment and political pressure to pass, and which shows that he does not believe we have a weak level of responsibility stemming from this negative duty of justice. The inability to directly change the global order leads him to argue that responsible members of the global order must pay retribution to the poor in accord with the harm the global policies are causing.

Pogge’s account of global poverty and retributive justice is distinct in its criteria for harms as well as its claims for responsibility. Retributive justice is a much stronger demand than charity, and it allows Pogge to ask more of members of the global order. He is not the first to suggest that reparation should be paid to the poor; others have suggested reimbursing the poor for resources used. He is different, however, in his approach of attacking many different global policies as harmful agents. He combines this with an insistence that each member of the global order is individually responsible for the collective actions performed by the global order. This responsibility creates a worldwide obligation for reparations instead of reparations for a few who have used the poor’s resources or manipulated them. His emphasis on the historical aspects of the global order’s oppression of the poor also suggests that individuals may be responsible for others’ actions. He takes into account both natural disasters and natural disparities in wealth,

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<sup>11</sup> WPHR p. 210

addressing issues commonly blamed for poverty. He recognizes that some poverty is not caused by wrongs and therefore is not a violation of a negative duty. By creating a systematic way to analyze poverty, Pogge goes far beyond the simple measures of the poverty lines. This in-depth analysis not only provides the criteria for determining harm, but guides him towards his analysis of particular global policies in order to eliminate those causing harm.

Pogge's theory is meant to offer a less controversial but far reaching account of global justice. The empirical issues about whether or not the developing world is harmed by the global institutions formed by the developed world are incredibly complex. Pogge provides in-depth analysis of some of these policies and highlights which he believes are the most harmful. His empirical analysis of these policies and proposed empirical solutions are questioned by Joshua Cohen<sup>12</sup> and others. However, instead of debating the implications of the empirical data, I would like to focus on the theoretical claims about responsibility.

The question of responsibility is crucial to Pogge's argument. He needs to establish individual responsibility for collective actions so that he can justify individual reparations for collective wrongs. Without this responsibility, his argument does not contain the unique strength he needs to provide a new solution for poverty. However, Pogge may have overstepped his bounds or perhaps been too optimistic in his assessment of responsibility. If his definition of responsibility does not hold up to scrutiny, he would be forced to revise the obligations he places on individual citizens.

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<sup>12</sup> See Cohen, Joshua. "Philosophy, Social Science, Global Poverty." *Thomas Pogge and His Critics*. Ed. Alison M. Jaggar. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010.

## II. Criticisms and Objections

The strength of Pogge's argument lies in his ability to place the blame for poverty on a large number of individuals who would be able to financially make retribution for this blame. However, his argument needs to establish these individuals as responsible for the poverty before it can make demands on them. An examination of one of Pogge's prominent critics, Debra Satz, and his own responses will help explicate the problems with Pogge's account of individual responsibility and how it affects his entire theory. Where Pogge's account of responsibility fails, his claims for a solution of retributive justice will also fail. Pogge is invested in maintaining the original levels of responsibility and retribution for which he originally calls.

In her article, "What Do We Owe the Global Poor," Debra Satz questions the level of responsibility for global injustice that Pogge places on the typical American citizen. Satz notes that the ideal situation to determine the responsibility of an agent is an agent acting on his own behalf with all of the information about the situation available. However, this is neither the case in reality nor the case in Pogge's argument. The typical American does not make global policy decisions on his own behalf. Satz does not think that this means that the typical American has no responsibility for the government's decisions. She argues that although the citizen has some responsibility, it is different from the kind of responsibility Pogge is assigning the citizen. She makes an important distinction between personal and civic responsibility. Personal responsibility, acting on one's own behalf, is the strongest. Civic responsibility entails upholding the laws of one's nation and influencing those laws so that they are just. Citizens do have civic obligations, but they are weaker than personal responsibilities because the individual have less control over them or ability to make change through them. However, Satz believes decisions about global institutions are more removed from the individual than civic decisions. The policies

of a global institution are often agreements governments make between each other, not agreements made by individual governments. Governments usually have debates and make agreements on these policies during secret meetings. In addition, these institutions do not elect their leaders and employees in any sort of global election, but rather place them through appointments, making it even more difficult for a citizen to have any influence over who makes these decisions. For example, even if the President, whom the citizen could vote for, appointed someone to the office, the President does not run on a campaign which details exactly whom he or she would appoint to such an office. It is difficult for a citizen to influence whom his elected leader will appoint to office.

These decisions are not only difficult for a citizen to influence, but also are difficult for a citizen to understand. Even if a citizen could influence the decisions, would he have enough information to make the decisions? Satz argues that the average citizen of a developed nation would not, emphasizing that global policies are debated in closed-door meetings between influential countries. She uses American citizens as an example of citizens of a wealthy nation. Many Americans have no way of discerning exactly what global policies are in force and what these policies entail for poorer nations. Satz's concern about an individual American's influence and knowledge leads her to assign lesser responsibility to individual citizens.

Satz is concerned that Pogge's theory seems to place an impoverished citizen in a wealthy nation in a greater place of responsibility for poverty than it places a wealthy person in a poor nation. An impoverished American would probably not meet the criteria for poverty. Poor Americans are generally much richer than the global poor and benefit from social programs and even resources which are not available to other poor peoples, like running water. However, does an unemployed American struggling to feed his family still have an obligation to struggle for

global justice? And does his obligation supersede those of someone with far more resources to give? Satz disagrees with Pogge that the American citizen would still have the greater obligation. She places far greater weight on the individual's ability to give; Pogge places weight on the individual's ability to change the unjust policies of the global order. Pogge explains the difference between these positions in his reply to Satz.

In his reply, Pogge stands firm in his argument that an American citizen has full responsibility for any and all effects of the global institutions in which America does or does not participate. He states that the obligation to amend the policies lies first with the politicians and members of the institutions who actually create and enforce these policies, but he does not think that their primacy gives the common citizen any less responsibility. He argues that the only reason their actions have any power is because citizens give them the power to act in their name. Citizens are fully responsible for the actions that politicians perform in their name and that governments enforce using their power. He argues that Satz's complaint that most of the meetings are secretive is merely a sign that we must demand both transparency and accountability. Pogge believes American citizens need to know everything that happens in these meetings and be able to hold people accountable for poor decisions made in their name and power. Any attempts to leave these proceedings alone are merely protests so that the American citizen does not have to know about the injustice he is perpetuating and does not feel compelled to change it. Once a citizen had access to the meeting, he would be obliged to change policies. Pogge thinks this transparency will answer Satz's complaint that the American agent does not have the information or influence to make global policy decisions. Pogge agrees, and thinks we must demand greater participation, but still maintains that we are fully responsible regardless of whether we are allowed this greater participation.

On Pogge's account each individual is fully responsible because of the power wielded in the individual's name, not because of the individual's particular resources. He argues that small nations with little international influence must try to influence global policies to effect just change, and so also small individuals with little influence must try to influence policies. Despite their admittedly lesser influence, Pogge argues that these countries and people are still fully responsible for global poverty. He admits to some degree of difference in personal responsibility tied to influence, insinuating that greater influence must have some greater responsibility tied to it. However, he does not believe this responsibility based on circumstances can be calculated. He also does not want to accept this responsibility as the only responsibility a citizen has. As a benefitting member of the global order, the citizen should be fully accountable for all harms levied by the global order.

Two examples show how Pogge imagines responsibility to be divided amongst the members of the global order. He explains that, "In this way, the sum total of what we are individually responsible for may greatly exceed the total. There is nothing odd about this. If three persons each make a necessary contribution to a homicide, each of them is fully responsible for the resulting death. As it is, many groups of affluent persons make necessary contributions to the massive persistence of severe poverty."<sup>13</sup> Pogge compares each person's contribution to an act of killing rather than being an accessory to murder. This level of culpability maintains a strict obligation for each individual citizen to cease harms on the poor, eliminating Satz's objection of dividing obligation according to varying influence on the global order or on resources.

Pogge's second example also shows the full responsibility of citizens in the global order who are not in positions of leadership or great wealth. He cites the abolitionist movement of 18<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Satz, Debra. "What Do We Owe the Global Poor?" *Ethics and International Affairs* 19.1 (2005): 47-54. *Academic Search Alumni Edition*. Web. 24 Mar. 2012.



and early 19<sup>th</sup> century Manchester, which is credited with ending slavery in Britain. The middle-class people of Manchester refused to buy sugar because it was produced by the slaves and fought the use of slaves in gathering cotton despite Manchester's dependence on the textile industry. Pogge shows that these people were at least just as uneducated, disadvantaged, and uninfluential as the typical American citizen, if not more. Yet their efforts helped to end slavery in Britain; they took responsibility for the atrocity they knew they were perpetuating. Pogge pleads for his fellow citizens to see how acceptance of the same responsibility could end poverty as it could end slavery. Pogge, however, does not ignore the fact that the abolitionist movement was also furthered and pushed by some of the wealthiest elites. He does not venture to offer an exact account of how influential the middle-class Manchester abolitionists were in contrast with the wealthier elites. However, effectiveness is not at the heart of Pogge's theory. No matter the level of efficiency, the individual is responsible and morally required to fight these injustices.

Pogge's arguments that the members of the global society ought to change the social order implies that these citizens can change the policies. Without being able to prove that the citizen can change the global order, Pogge must refrain from his claims of their responsibility. He and Satz's exchange shows that there is significant debate about whether or not an individual is capable of making these changes. If the citizen can only change some of the systems which Pogge rails against, then it seems that the citizen should only be responsible for changing these systems.

Pogge's use of negative duties provides a more compelling argument than an argument from positive duties, but his argument places too much responsibility on individuals. Pogge argues for complete transparency and accountability for global institutions so that individuals can be held personally responsible for their actions. He makes it seem as if the only reason that

individuals do not have drastic influence over global economic decisions is the global order's selfish transactions. Pogge may be right that many economic decisions are made in self-serving ways, but he is not right that simply allowing individuals to access the proceedings would result in drastically better decisions. The complex global economy, as well as the complexities of national and local economies, are not simple subjects understood by every citizen. They are certainly not subjects even taught to most citizens. The fierce debate between Pogge and his critics shows that even experts have difficulty discerning statistically what measures can reduce poverty without inducing harm. Would allowing individuals to have access to worldwide economic meetings really provide a more effective and unified answer? Pogge is however, less concerned with efficacy and more concerned with responsibility. Does allowing individuals to have access to every single global discussion give them the same exact level of responsibility for the decisions made? Decision-makers in international organizations are highly educated and highly trained individuals with a wealth of knowledge about the causes and effects of global, national, and local economic decisions. Every individual citizen of a nation does not have the information at his disposal to be able to make these economic decisions simply by virtue of accessing the proceedings.

The populace is not totally free from responsibility; they still choose the government leaders who choose these individuals, and they can demand results from both. They cannot, however, be charged with the same level of responsibility. As Satz worries, a citizen of the global order like a typical American citizen does not have the influence to simply change global policy through civic interactions. If the entire populace voted on every single position in the government, what voters would need to learn about each candidate is impractically time-consuming. Even if appointees were voted in, their decisions in international trade agreements

would still not be directly controlled by the people. As seen in Greece's struggles to retain EU status and economic bailouts, citizens' attempt to control or demand a vote on austerity measures imposed on them by their government's agreements produced near chaos.<sup>14</sup> While this clearly points to problems in the current structure of the global order, it does not point to the ease of individuals simply changing these policies.

Individuals do have clear responsibility over their own economic transactions. Pogge's own example of individuals changing the global order points to this idea. The Manchester citizens did not affect the slave trade through changing British policy; they changed it by refusing to purchase goods produced at the expense of the slaves. These citizens used the influence that they definitely had to influence the economic system and eventually economic policy was changed. Although this method is not as direct as simply changing an unjust policy, it allowed individuals to cease their personal contribution to slavery. In the same way, just individual economic transitions would allow individuals to remove harms from the impoverished that they are currently imposing.

Responsibility for decisions made belongs to those with the power to make decisions. Pogge's argument may show that the global order has caused harm, but he is unable to definitively show how individuals are responsible for these harms. He claims that the responsibility rests fully on each member of global society, despite Satz's objections. However, his claim that individuals ought to make these changes does not fully address the problems of whether or not they can. Pogge's strength is his ability to tie harms to responsibility. This argument for responsibility could be made stronger if the argument could avoid the problems of

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<sup>14</sup> Kitsantonis, Niki, and Rachel Donadio. "Disgruntled Greeks Protest New Austerity Measures." *The New York Times*. 10 Feb. 2012. Web. 24 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/11/world/europe/greeks-start-48-hour-strike-after-austerity-measures.html?pagewanted=all>>.

individuals who cause harm being unable to stop this harm. If individuals had a greater ability for change, then they would have a greater responsibility for it.

A stronger argument for responsibility would include decisions made by an individual, not made by another in that individual's name. A more direct responsibility would proceed from this more direct violation of the individual's duty not to harm. Since most global economic policies are made in an individual's name, what economic impact can an individual have? An individual impacts the economy directly through his employment and his purchasing power. These individual transactions with the local, national, and global economies bear the most responsibility to avoid violating the duty not to harm. A systematic examination is needed to determine whether or not there are harms caused by individual transactions which violate the negative duty. These transactions, which are much easier for the individual to cease, become the harms which are either ended or for which retribution is paid.

Although actions made in an individual's name do not create as strong of a responsibility as actions made by an individual, they can still be validly assessed. In this way, Pogge's argument that citizens bear some responsibility for actions in their name is still valid. It still follows from his argument that citizens should try to change unjust policies or pay retribution. The argument that individual decisions generate stronger responsibility does not eliminate the responsibility for group or national decisions. However, evaluating individual decisions will show more direct ways in which individuals both harm others and can stop this harm.

### **III. Individual Responsibility and the Negative Duty**

Pogge's attempt to create a robust theory of global justice based on the violation of negative duty has some problems with its concept of responsibility. His account refuses to distinguish individual responsibility from civic and national responsibilities. His account of responsibility fails to prove that the individual can make the changes he argues one ought to make. Without this proof, his argument that the individual must make these changes fails. However, if there are individual responsibilities, stemming from negative duties, that individuals are clearly able to address, then these responsibilities would hold the strength Pogge originally intended his argument to have. Instead of viewing the individual as one member of the global political structure, a new theory will examine the individual as one member of the global economy.

Individual economic transactions can create stronger obligations for individuals. If these transactions cause harm to others, they violate the negative duty of the individual not to harm, creating the obligations to end harm and pay retribution. To establish whether or not any of these transactions can be considered harmful, harmful practices must be defined. Then the responsibilities which arise out of the harmful practices must be determined and considered.

To determine whether the duty not to harm can be violated in individual purchases, several factors need to be considered and criteria set out for what constitutes harm, just as Pogge has done. Pogge's criteria are a useful guide for creating a new set of criteria, but they are not all relevant to the new question at hand. Instead, a new set must be crafted, keeping in mind the intricacies of both the purchase and production of a good or service. The criteria must be specific enough to analyze one interaction but broad enough to cover the vast range of different types of consumption.

The agents and recipients in this new system must be fundamentally different from Pogge's. Pogge is able to set out the victims of those harmed on a global scale since he argues that large global organizations are the perpetrators of the harm. Even if large global organizations are involved in perpetrating the injustices involved in an individual transaction, they will not be explicitly implicated in a system focused on individual responsibility. Although those harmed by transactions may be a group of people, one transaction will not encompass the entirety of impoverished peoples. This is a departure from Pogge's claim that almost all global poverty could be solved through a few simple solutions. Instead of aiming to define how to end all global poverty, this theory aims to define how to end all global poverty for which one is individually responsible and can therefore be truly subject to retributive claims.

The criteria for individual transactions will cover several different aspects of harmful labor practices. Instead of using the existence of poverty as evidence of harm, these criteria will set out conditions of which define a harmful economic practice. These harmful practices will include harms to the laborer or community members. The first few practices consider labor involved in either the production or sale of a purchasable item or service. The next practices consider the impact of production on individuals. Those who promote or participate in these harmful practices are subject to demands to end it immediately and pay retribution.

The most obvious type of labor which imposes harm on the worker is slavery. Modern slavery includes "the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised" and "all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty for which the said person has not offered himself

voluntarily.”<sup>15</sup> These two definitions encompass both slavery by coercion and debt bondage. Slavery by coercion is illegal in every country, yet the practice persists. Debt bondage usually involves a laborer being forced to work for an employer until he pays off a certain debt which he will never make enough to repay. Debt bondage is more prevalent and more difficult to recognize than slavery. Recent investigations into the scale of human trafficking and slavery have produced various estimates for the number of slaves today. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated in 2005 that the minimum number was 12.3 million, and Harvard University’s fellow Siddharth Kara estimated in 2006 that the true number is somewhere between 24 million and 32 million.<sup>16</sup> The prevalence of slave labor in the international community shows that a large number of products and services must be affected by slaves.

Another form of slavery is child labor. Child labor is extensive and pervasive in many countries. The numbers of child slaves, where known, is included in both of the slavery estimates above. The Department of Labor’s “List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor”<sup>17</sup> details countries and products where this practice is prevalent. Child labor standards are defined internationally by the ILO’s minimum age convention. The convention bans all labor before 13, restricts labor from 13-15 to light labor which does not interfere with education, and provides additional restrictions on labor from 15-18.<sup>18</sup> Despite these restrictions, child slavery continues in impoverished communities.

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<sup>15</sup>Tanneeru, Manav. “The Challenges of Counting a ‘Hidden Population.’” CNN. Web. 24 March 2012. <<http://thecnnfreedomproject.blogs.cnn.com/2011/03/09/slavery-numbers/>>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> United States. Dept. of Labor. Bureau of International Labor Affairs. *List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor*. 1st ed. Washington: GPO, 2009. Web. 24 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.dol.gov/ilab/programs/ocft/PDF/2009TVPRA.pdf>>.

<sup>18</sup> International Labour Organization. *Minimum Age Convention*. 1973, No. 138. Web. 24 March 2012. <[http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:175304071362417::NO:12100:P12100\\_INSTRUMENT\\_ID:312283:NO](http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:175304071362417::NO:12100:P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312283:NO)>.

Paid labor must still meet other qualifications before it can be said to truly respect the dignity of the worker. The worker must be fairly compensated for the time and type of labor he performs. Workers must be free from working unrealistic hours which prevent them from having a balanced life which includes more than simply working. Freedom to associate and redress wrongs is also important in protecting the worker from harms which may be intentionally or unintentionally caused by the employer. Equal opportunities for employment regardless of ethnicity, race, or sex as well as protections for pregnant women and mothers are also conditions for fair labor. Labor policies which ignore basic protections for workers harm them by placing their value as laborers above their rights as human persons.

The final category of labor which imposes harm is labor which is physically dangerous or performed in unsanitary conditions. The ILO's occupational health standards cite concerns for workplace hygiene, radiation, carcinogens, air pollution, noise, asbestos, and hazardous chemicals.<sup>19</sup> Certain occupations, such as mining, are specifically discussed by the ILO because of their hazardous nature.<sup>20</sup> Reasonable precautions must be taken to protect workers and to redress the injuries of any accidents that may occur; when they are not, the workers are harmed.

Several other inherently harmful types of labor are not universally agreed upon as being harmful, or at least not inherently harmful. These include various ways for a laborer to sell his or her body, including prostitution, surrogate pregnancy, organ sale, or gamete sale. Without delving into the extensive arguments about any of these topics, each is often viewed in one of three ethical ways. The first is that the act is inherently harmful to the laborer, or that the act is in

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<sup>19</sup> International Labour Organization. *Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Recommendation*. 2006, No. 197. Web. 24 March 2012.  
<[http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:751950590367802::NO:12100:P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:R197:NO.](http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:751950590367802::NO:12100:P12100_ILO_CODE:R197:NO.)>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



itself corrupt. If this is the case, that type of labor would definitely be harmful. The second is that the act is harmful when it occurs, and it often does, through coercion either through force or the immense pressure of poverty. This would place that type of labor closer to slavery, which has already been defined as harmful. However, still others argue that these types of labor are ethically legitimate and not harmful. If these practices are either coercively or corruptly harmful, they should be included in the list of practices which hurt workers.

Laborers are not the only ones affected by harmful practices in industry. Societies which live around or near natural resources can be harmed through unethical business practices in obtaining these resources. The primary concern for these people is whether or not the taking of their natural resources is harmful to them. Does the industry which mines or gathers the resources promote the society? Does it justly employ local workers, bringing economic development to that society? If the society is benefitted from the economic activity which mines the resources, it may not be harmed. However, if the society is still poor, and has no recourse or access to profit from its own natural resources, then it is harmed by the taking of these resources.

A society can also be harmed by the destruction of the environment through business practices. For example, pollution in an area will affect the health of everyone, indiscriminately harming those in the affected area. Pollution can also damage soils and crops, leading to hunger and reduced income for farmers. Clean water and sanitation efforts can also be affected by a problem of pollution. This is especially relevant to the poor because they are often the only ones unable to move out of a damaged area. Damaging the environment may also violate a duty not to harm the environment, but these examples show simply the harm which can be caused to people through environmental neglect and damage.

These harmful economic practices shed light on the kind of harms an economic transaction could be perpetuating. These criteria cover some of the most egregious wrongs in the modern economy, but they set out the structure for other criteria. Any business practice which can be shown to be directly harmful to any person or persons could be understood and added as a new criterion. If any of these unjust practices is used in the gathering of raw materials, production, or sale of a product or service, then the transaction becomes unjust. By financially promoting injustice, the consumer is causing harm to those affected by the unjust practices.

Whenever the duty not to harm has been violated, the individual violating it must bear some responsibility. In all of these cases, the individual would primarily have the duty to stop purchasing the product tainted by unfair labor practices. If the practices were occurring within the individual's own employment, his responsibility is still greater. His primary obligation then is to stop the practice there or stop promoting the practice through his work with those culpable. For example, if a t-shirt designer discovers that the supply chain he uses to purchase t-shirts compels its female workers to take pregnancy tests, fires them if they are pregnant, and forces them to take contraception to avoid becoming pregnant,<sup>21</sup> the t-shirt designer has an obligation to stop supporting these practices by purchasing shirts made by these oppressed workers. In addition, he owes retribution to the workers who have been unfairly treated and oppressed. Since he knows how these unfair practices have hurt the workers, namely denying them their rights as women, he could donate to support feminist efforts in the community of the sweatshop or to support efforts to change these unfair labor practices.

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<sup>21</sup> This practice has been documented among textile factories in Honduras. Kauffman, Matthew, and Lisa Chedeke. "Standards Proposed for School-apparel Firms." *Hartford Courant*. 04 Mar. 2005. Web. 24 Mar. 2012. <[http://articles.courant.com/2005-03-04/news/0503040707\\_1\\_anti-sweatshop-sweatfree-communities-apparel-suppliers](http://articles.courant.com/2005-03-04/news/0503040707_1_anti-sweatshop-sweatfree-communities-apparel-suppliers)>.

The individual's obligation to stop these practices involves understanding and learning about these practices. The individual is responsible for his own knowledge of unfair practices. He must spread the knowledge of unfair economic practices so that others may see how they are also harming others through their practices. This could include reporting labor violations, promoting discussion of the topic, and seeking more information. Once a person begins to understand the possibility for his economic interactions to harm others, he must determine whether any of his interactions are dangerous. This involves examining every purchase an individual makes to determine whether or not it is a harmful transaction.

Individual responsibility compels consumers and employees to end economic violations of the duty not to harm. This responsibility stems from the unfair labor and production practices which hurt laborers and impoverished communities. Individuals must stop supporting these practices by avoiding purchases or work which promotes or involves them. The individual must also pay retribution for his own economic transactions which have already caused this harm. Finally, an individual must acknowledge the possibilities of harmful economic transactions and seek information on all of the purchases he makes.

#### IV. Considerations and Practical Implications for Individual Responsibility

Examining the individual as one member of the global economy has illuminated interesting responsibilities. It maintains the strength of the responsibilities from violations of negative duty which Pogge uses to create a robust theory. It avoids the problematic account of individual responsibility given by Pogge. The individual still faces the possibility of violating his duty not to harm in the various ways he participates in the economy. Considerations of his employment and his purchases create obligations to discover and redress wrongs. Now this theory must be examined to see if it falls prey to any objections about its account of responsibility or obligations and to see if its strengths create far-reaching demands which can affect global poverty.

There are many considerations, questions, and implications for this theory of individual responsibility focused around economic transactions. There are concerns for its handling of civic, institutional, and national responsibility. The amount of consumer information required raises questions of access and transparency. It is subject to practical concerns about the scope of the harmful practices, the scope of transactions which support these practices, and the practical effects of changing these practices. There is also a question of the scope of poverty which can be eliminated through the lens of individual responsibility. After these concerns are addressed, there are implications for this theory which show why it is valuable and practical for the individual consumer or employee.

By focusing on individual responsibility, claims for civic, national, and institutional responsibility have not been discussed. Fortunately, having individual obligations to end injustice does not preclude civic, national, or institutional obligations. Individuals still have the ability to assess decisions made in their name and act for change where they find harm being

done. This theory does not provide a complete discussion of how strong those obligations will be or how to assess decisions made for them. This reflects Satz's worry that Pogge's theory overreaches on those grounds. This theory does not overreach, but it also does not answer those questions. In doing so, it leaves open several questions on the impact of policies instituted by these governments. It does not discuss how trade policies affect the laborer or community in from which resources come, but it is clear that these policies will also affect them. It does not delineate criteria for determining harm in these effects. It would be problematic in practice to ignore global policy. Much of the data on these labor practices comes from national and international policymakers who seek to improve their policies. Many of the organizations working to end these harms work not only on the individual level, but also on the national and global level. The theory of individual responsibility introduces a clearer set of harms and resulting obligations, but it does not negate the more complicated set of global harms and resulting obligations. One could easily accept the implications of the individual responsibility theory as well as the majority of the implications of global harms and obligations from Pogge. The most prominent difference in the practicality of Pogge's theory is that the individual has stronger obligations where he has stronger influence and therefore has weaker global obligations than Pogge would like. The theory of individual responsibility also does not address the relevance of the historical situation which may have affected the economy. Understanding the historical situation may be crucial for implementing effective change which respects the cultures of the peoples involved, but it does not bear any relation to whether or not harms have occurred in labor practices. Unlike Pogge's theory, individual responsibility only focuses on what that one individual has caused, and therefore cannot implicate him in the wrongs of previous persons. This does not prevent an individual from having positive obligations to assist those who have

been hurt by previous persons, but it does preclude others' actions violating the individual's own negative duty.

Determining whether an individual product or service has caused harms to another person involves gaining a lot of knowledge about that product or service. This raises questions of whether or not individual responsibility falls prey to the problem of if the individual can determine if he is causing harm. If the individual cannot make this determination, then it is not correct to claim that he ought to make this determination. Pogge's definition of responsibility failed to defend itself against this claim, and the obligations for which he calls are weaker because of it. However, individuals have more power to sever relations with an unjust business than with an unjust intergovernmental treaty. Individuals can much more easily stop purchasing from or working for a business than they can stop a government from acting in their name. Most people can only live under one government at a time. A government could respond to a citizen who would like to remove it because it acts unjustly in his name, but if it does not, the citizen's options to stop the harm are small or dramatic. However, if companies see that they can gain or lose customers based on the ethicality of their practices, new companies will form and practices will adapt quickly to keep the customers. Businesses who understand that there are paying customers who would pay more for products which have a guarantee of ethical standards will crop up to serve that market. There is much more freedom in economics for a niche market than a niche political theory, so an individual is able to have greater impact in the economic sphere.

There are also practical concerns about the theory of individual responsibility. One highlighted by the discussion on the individual's knowledge is whether or not the individual can truly have an impact on this injustice. Another related fear is whether this injustice is truly prevalent enough to justify extensive measures to stop it or if there are more pressing causes of

poverty which should be addressed. Theoretically, this worry will not impact whether or not harm is caused and if it brings obligations. Instead, this is a broader concern about approaches to poverty. The US Department of Labor's report acknowledges, "Most child labor occurs in smallscale production of goods for local consumption,<sup>16</sup> rather than for international trade. Adequate data is limited on the consumption patterns of goods made with forced labor. In conducting research, ILAB did not distinguish between goods produced for domestic consumption and for export, due to data limitations and the fact that this was not part of the mandate of the TVPRA."<sup>22</sup> This lack of information about how many products a consumer encounters might be made with child labor is disheartening. It is something the consumer must determine. Even though the Department of Labor is unsure how many of these products reach American consumers, they know that some of these products do. They state that, due to increasing economic troubles, "the need for information and action to combat forced labor and child labor has increased."<sup>23</sup> The list of goods compiled by the department shows that many of these goods, of which some quantity are produced unethically, are goods which are imported in some quantity to the United States from these countries.

A final concern for individual responsibility stems from the fact that it does not address poverty as a whole, but only certain harms stemming from economic conditions. It is possible that some of these conditions could harm people who are not in poverty and will not fall into poverty because of them. It is more possible that these economic harms are only a small part of the range of poverty causes. These may both be true, but they do not eliminate the duties that an

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<sup>22</sup> United States. Dept. of Labor. Bureau of International Labor Affairs. *List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor*. 2nd ed. Washington: GPO, 2011. p. 27. Web. 24 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.dol.gov/ilab/programs/ocft/PDF/2011TVPRA.pdf>>.

The citation within the quote is "U.S. Department of Labor, *By the Sweat and Toil of Children: The Use of Children in American Imports*, 1994, 2."

<sup>23</sup>United States. Dept. of Labor. Bureau of International Labor Affairs. *List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor*. p. 46

individual has towards those he has harmed. These harms are real and pervasive, and definitive action to stop them and pay retribution for the harms they cause is morally necessary, regardless of how many people are harmed and how many other causes of poverty exist.

The advantages of a theory focused on individual responsibility are both theoretical and practical. The theory maintains the value of a stronger claim to obligations due to more immediate harm caused by the agent and the agent's ability to meet those obligations. It does this while still defending the advantageous claim that individuals are violating a negative duty and thus causing harm. Violations of negative duty, as shown earlier, produce these stronger and clearer obligations towards the victims of injustice. This gives the moral imperative to help these victims greater weight in various ethical theories. It appeals not just to sympathy and compassion, but to guilt and justice. These demands are strong and provide a compelling framework with which to view and assess economic transactions.

Individual responsibility promotes knowledge and responsibility in every economic transaction. This may be demanding in that it asks an individual to consider every decision he makes. It is foreign to many of the consumerist societies today to examine every single purchase or research products before purchasing. It may be unusual, but that does not make it wrong. Greater accountability for actions promotes individuals to acknowledge that they do not know from where many of their products came or, more importantly, from whom. The recent scandal of injustices both real and imagined in Apple's Foxconn factories in China has shown how disturbing and possible it is for millions of unsuspecting consumers to be complicit in horrific oppression.<sup>24</sup> Fortunately, the reactions of Apple customers to this scandal and previous ones have impelled Apple to take seriously charges against harms in both resource-gathering and

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<sup>24</sup> Palis, Courteney. "Apple Publishes Data On Foxconn Working Conditions." *Huffington Post*. 21 Mar. 2012. Web. 24 Mar. 2012. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/21/apple-foxconn-working-conditions\\_n\\_1369878.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/21/apple-foxconn-working-conditions_n_1369878.html)>.



production. Apple has responded by publishing more information than ever on its practices and acknowledges where it fails to meet the standards set by the Fair Labor Organization and the Global e-Sustainability Initiative, two groups it works with to hold itself accountable for its practices.<sup>25</sup> This example serves to show that even an organization striving to avoid these harms can fail, and consumers should hold them responsible. It also testifies to an individual's ability to demand transparency. This one example has prompted many to examine and question other technology companies on ethical standards.

The recent demand for accountability in production and service extends far beyond Apple. Since the US Department of Labor has published its list of goods often produced like slavery, activist groups such as Slavery Footprint<sup>26</sup> and Anti-Slavery International<sup>27</sup> have emerged to raise consumer awareness of the possibility of slavery being involved in their products. An executive order has required federal contractors who use goods on the list to be reasonably certain the goods imported are not produced by slaves.<sup>28</sup> Pressure from college activists has prompted states to take action in verifying the ethical standards of companies they contract with through state schools.<sup>29</sup> Organizations like the Fair Trade USA<sup>30</sup> and Equal Exchange<sup>31</sup> seek to provide consumers with labels and investigations that specially mark fairly produced and traded goods. Recent awareness campaigns and global attention to human trafficking and fairly traded goods has provided consumers with information and options which make it even easier for them to ensure their purchases are not harming others.

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.apple.com/supplierresponsibility/code-of-conduct/labor-and-human-rights.html>

<sup>26</sup> [slaveryfootprint.org](http://slaveryfootprint.org)

<sup>27</sup> [productsofslavery.org](http://productsofslavery.org)

<sup>28</sup> Exec. Order No. 13126, 3 C.F.R. (1999).

<sup>29</sup> Kauffman, Matthew, and Lisa Chedeke. "Standards Proposed for School-apparel Firms." *Hartford Courant*. 04 Mar. 2005. Web. 24 Mar. 2012. <[http://articles.courant.com/2005-03-04/news/0503040707\\_1\\_anti-sweatshop-sweatfree-communities-apparel-suppliers](http://articles.courant.com/2005-03-04/news/0503040707_1_anti-sweatshop-sweatfree-communities-apparel-suppliers)>.

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.fairtradeusa.org/>

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.equalexchange.coop/>

## V. Conclusion

In the face of horrific and pervasive global poverty, philosophers have attempted to craft theories of global justice which explain our obligation to the poor. Theories like Singer's have attempted to frame the solution as theoretically simple and practically daunting. Thomas Pogge introduced the concept of poverty as a violation of a negative duty to support the practically daunting nature of solving poverty with a robust theoretical explanation which implicates all individuals in wealthy and developed nations. Objections, like Satz's, show that Pogge's concept of global injustice overestimates the abilities of the individual and neglects the minimal role he plays in crafting and changing global policies. Instead, a theory of individual responsibility was proposed which primarily focused on the individual's duty not to harm not through global economic policies but through individual economic transactions. These transactions were vulnerable to causing a number of possible harms to others. The theory's strong obligations promote an acknowledgment of terrible abuses to the poor, such as slavery and resource-stealing. The individual must cease these harms and pay retribution for those he has harmed. Although demanding knowledge and responsibility for each of the individual's transaction creates a strong burden on the individual, it does not create one he is unable to fulfill. Through a careful examination and change of his economic habits, an individual is able to free himself from oppressing others through his labor and consumption. This oppression cannot account for all of the oppression and horrors which the poor face, but it can create a strong theory to defend eliminating this oppression on the individual level.