"Assessing Philosophical Approaches to Combating International Poverty"

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On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid on this paper.

In forming contemporary poverty policy, one aspect of the decision-making process is far too often ignored: whether or not a policy or set of policies responds adequately to a concrete set of ethical questions. In forming policy, it is essential that lawmakers, activists and other concerned citizens have goals to work towards. What must not escape them is that these goals have their origin in one or another system of ethical theory. While it is not necessary for every policymaker to be a philosophical ethicist, some sense of major ethical theories can inform, elucidate, and improve our actions against poverty.

This paper will examine several philosophical approaches to poverty, and attempt to find the one among them that will be most effective in the fight against international poverty. The four major approaches that will be examine are a rights-based approach, illustrated by the work of Henry Shue; a Kantian approach, illustrated by the work of Onora O'Neill; an Aristotelian approach based on the work of Martha Nussbaum; and a feminist ethics approach based on the work of a variety of thinkers.

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It will be a fundamental premise of this paper that philosophical approaches to poverty must be informed by an awareness of human capabilities. The relationship between poverty and human capability was first articulated by Amartya Sen. He describes the perspective of the capabilities perspective in this way:

> *Functionings* represent parts of the state of a person—in particular the various things that he or she manages to do or be in leading a life. The *capability* of a person reflects the alternative combinations of functionings the person can achieve, and from which he or she can choose one collection. The approach is based on a view of living as a combination of various 'doings and beings', with quality of life to be assessed in terms of the capability to achieve valuable functionings (Sen 31).

The capabilities approach provides a more meaningful assessment of the effect poverty has on the lives of persons, and is particularly useful in the context of third-world countries. For example, if an impoverished person lives in a robust democracy where he has the opportunity to organize or work for policies that will improve his situation, then he has a capability that an impoverished person living in a totalitarian state could not be said to have. Although participation in government is not a traditional measure of poverty, Sen makes an excellent argument that a person who is not afforded participation in her government is at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to improving her life, and thus has fewer capabilities than a person in a democratic state. What matters most, in the capabilities perspective, is not the raw amount of money or resources that a person possesses, but the capabilities that a person has to use those resources to live a fulfilling life and achieve well-being. The capabilities approach makes studies of poverty richer and more accurate.

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A second major premise of this paper that approaches to international poverty must take into consideration essential issues of gender and inequality and that antipoverty programs that do not address the experiences, contributions, and hardships of women are doomed to fail. Philosophical ethics has for far too long ignored the diverse experiences of women, children, and other minorities; the standard used in ethical argumentation has traditionally been the "rational man." Now, ethicists of various stripes are trying to become more sensitive to important role gender, ethnicity, and other factors play in ethical dilemmas. In the contemporary world, ethical theories must realize that a model of "rational man" cannot speak for every person.

Drawing on these two fundamental premises, it will become apparent that each of the approaches (rights-based, Kantian, Aristotelian and feminist ethics) has advantages. By

the conclusion of the paper it will be clear that an approach based on feminist ethics has the best chance to address the diverse human experiences of poverty. Though ultimately the bulk of policy recommendations for each theory may be similar to those of the others, a feminist-based approach will carry out these policies with a higher level of sensitivity and a higher rate of success than the other two. An approach grounded in feminist ethics is more prepared to address the challenges of the capability perspective and of the gender and inequality question.

Henry Shue and Basic Rights

Let us first discuss the rights-based approach of Henry Shue. Shue's method will be at least nominally familiar to those raised in Western democracies, for Shue bases his arguments around a theory of "basic rights." When we think of basic rights, we often think of the Declaration of Liberty's call for "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" or of political rights such as voting. Shue extends the scope of basic rights to subsistence rights. A brief examination of Shue's work will enable us to determine how his theory fares under the scrutiny of the capabilities and gender perspectives.

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Shue's theories on international poverty are contained in his book *Basic Rights: Subsistence, Affluence, and U. S. Foreign Policy.* The book, originally designed to comment on United States policies in the late 1970s, has since been revised and updated. His argument throughout the book is that the basic argument for rights that are commonly held to be fundamental in the West, such as the right to physical security, bears many similarities to the argument for subsistence rights. He acknowledges several forms of basic

rights, and subsistence rights are the ones that he is most passionate about, because he believes them to be the least widely acknowledged basic rights. He writes,

> It will emerge that subsistence, or minimal economic security, which is more controversial than physical security, can also be shown to be as well justified as a basic right as physical security is—and for the same reasons… Indeed, prevention of deficiencies in the essentials for survival is, if anything, more basic than prevention of violations of physical security. People who lack protection against violations of their physical security can, if they are free, fight back against their attackers or flee, but people who lack essentials, such as food, because of forces beyond their control, often can do nothing and are on their own utterly helpless (Shue 23, 25).

Shue's argument is that subsistence rights are necessary to enjoy all of the other rights that society can provide. A lack of proper nutrition can make a person too weak to enjoy her right to freedom of movement, for example. Subsistence rights are not a means to the end of enjoying other rights—they are fundamental to truly having those rights (Shue 26). Any right that is fundamental to having all other rights Shue terms a *basic right*.

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In correlation with basic rights, Shue argues that each nation and each person have correlative duties in order to ensure that everyone's basic rights are guaranteed. He devotes considerable time to breaking down the supposed distinction between "positive rights" and "negative rights." He argues that each basic right will entail duties of certain types: "I. Duties to *avoid* depriving. II. Duties to *protect* from deprivation. III. Duties to *aid* the deprived" (Shue 52). He effectively demonstrates that all basic rights will entail that we refrain from certain actions (that we do not assault another person, that we do not take away food from a starving person) and that we take certain actions (that we have a police force to protect people's physical security, that we have a way to ensure that food can be distributed to those in need). Thus, the distinction between positive and negative rights is

greatly diminished, since all rights lay claims on us both to act in certain way and not to act in other ways. Shue goes on to devote a great deal of time to describing what he believes is necessary to guarantee subsistence rights of all the world's population and to defend the realism of such a goal. All of his claims in these sections are not of direct interest to us here, but they will be referred to as we examine how Shue holds up on the basis of the capabilities and gender perspectives.

In Shue's work, capabilities as such are nowhere mentioned. However, it is clear that he addresses capabilities in some sense. For example, a fundamental argument of his work is that guaranteeing only certain basic rights is not enough; if people have freedom to assemble but their security rights are not guaranteed, they are not really capable of assembling peacefully (Shue 26). If people's subsistence rights are not guaranteed, then malnourished children who are guaranteed free public education may not really have the

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capability to learn. In his Afterword, Shue emphasizes the importance of designing institutions which protect subsistence rights, because doing so "allows victims of rights violations to become the agents of their own salvation" (Shue 167). Clearly, Shue understand the important ways in which his basic rights interact in producing empowerment, well-being, and capabilities for persons. In certain ways, however, Shue seems to misstep because he is emphasizing rights here, not capabilities. Shue understands part of the capabilities picture, but not all of it. While it may be that capabilities in some cases align with rights, it may not always be the case. For example, in his chapter addressing liberty and participation in government as basic rights, he states, "the lack of any certainty that arrangements for participation will enable everyone to enjoy security and subsistence may appear to undercut this part of the argument for acknowledging

participation as a basic right" (Shue 85). Later, he remarks that "it is not utterly inconceivable that some set of institutions without a basic right to participation might turn out to protect people's other basic rights as well as, or better than, the most effective participatory institutions do" (Shue 87). Shue is here neglecting an essential part of Sen's argument: that participation in institutions and liberties such as freedom of the press actually reinforce other capabilities. A familiarity with Sen's economic research that providing people with liberties may actually prevent famine shows that Shue's countenancing of a benevolent dictatorship may be misguided. Shue's work, while it seems to have some sympathies with the capabilities perspective, needs additional work to fully address it.

The most glaring weakness of Shue's theory is its lack of understanding for specific cultural circumstances or gender issues. For example, Shue's theory may well recommend a sweeping set of institutional and policy changes in nations around the world, both developed and developing. He writes in his Afterword that is it is the duty of developed nations to help ensure that the governments of third-world countries are guaranteeing their citizens' basic rights. He provides the example of Rwanda—where early intervention (or institutional change) to prevent genocide would have been more cost- and rights-efficient that dealing with the aftermath of refugees, orphans, and mass confusion (Shue 172). In response, he proposes a radical revision of international law: "sovereignty should be conditional upon performance, and performance should be judged by international norms: *conditional sovereignty, judged by minimal international standards, including the provision for basic rights* [emphasis Shue's]" (Shue 175). Shue is a bit unclear on what response basic rights violations in a country require other nations to do; he states that his

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goal is for "*decisive action, short of military intervention*" but does not fully explain what such actions might be (Shue 178). This part of Shue's argument brings to mind cultural imperialism and the current trend in American foreign policy towards "regime change." While Shue clearly disapproves of military intervention in Iraq (for example), it is unclear what "decisive actions" he would have recommended to guarantee the Iraqi people's basic rights (Shue, "Seminar"). Indeed, his statement that "often that those who will have failed [to protect rights] are a government, and stepping in involved military intervention" seems to suggest that he ought to have supported the Iraqi invasion, by his line of reasoning (Shue 178). While I agree with Shue that military intervention in Iraq is uncalled for, I believe that his problems arise because he ignores the importance of understanding diversity. Shue's theories have at times unpleasant whiffs of imperialism. For example, in arguing that our duties to protect rights extend beyond the borders of our own countries, Shue writes that

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> It seems most unlikely that every domestic government is always better able to comprehend and to implement the best solution for all the problems of its people that might concern others. Comprehension of effective solutions may require managerial or technical expertise that is not available domestically, and implementation may require capital or a will to change not found domestically (Shue 143).

While I do not think that Shue is advocating Western nations running roughshod over developing nations to enforce the correct standards of rights and duties, his abstract approach (based on logical argumentation and examples) takes impoverished persons out of the discussion. Though he acknowledges that impoverishes persons have a role to play in working to achieve the rights they deserve, he seems to underestimate their abilities to succeed in these roles. He pays very little attention to issues of inequality within states. He

does not discuss issues of gender, either. It would seem that he would group these issues as technical issues to be dealt with during implementation of policy, rather than fundamental philosophical questions to be addressed at the very beginning of the discussion of rights. Shue's rights-based approach is appealing because it builds on many Westerners' background in political rights and because it seems to have some relationship to the capabilities approach. However, it fails on the question of gender and inequality.

Onora O'Neill and Principles of Action

Next, we will examine the Kantian approach of Onora O'Neill. O'Neill is a part of a large movement of modern-day ethicists who have revived and reinvigorated the theories of Immanuel Kant. In her work, O'Neill is particularly concerned about what Kant's ethics have to say about autonomy, justice, and capabilities. She is also interested in examining Kantian recommendations for the women's rights movement. Thus, O'Neill's work is a rich source for the project at hand.

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O'Neill links international poverty and ethics in multiple essays and books. Since we just examined a rights-based view of ethics, an interesting way being our discussion of O'Neill's view is through her comments on rights. She writes,

> The rhetoric of rights is not only deceptively easy to promulgate, but deeply evasive… in speaking of the rhetoric of rights as evasive I do not mean to suggest that human rights, or women's rights, are unimportant, or that securing them is an unimportant political goal. My concern is rather that talking as if rights were the *core* of justice, and rights for women the *core* of justice for women, is a lazy way of talking and of thinking, which systematically obscures what we would most need to think about and to do if we were to take rights seriously… If there are obligations without corresponding rights, it will evidently impoverish moral thinking if one starts with the rights and leaves aside those

> obligations not mirrored by any rights. This thought by itself is reason enough to begin with obligations and not rights (*Bounds*, 97-99).

O'Neill's concerns are clearly going to be much different from Henry Shue's. O'Neill is much more concerned about the principles on which we act and on the obligations we have to others. Indeed, for O'Neill, justice will not be based so much on the guarantee of rights, but the fulfillment of obligations.

O'Neill argues that acting on universalizable principles is the best way to go about ensuring that all humans have essential capabilities. Kant's first formulation of the categorical imperative is thus the cornerstone of her ethical arguments. Kant, who argued that human reason distinguishes us from other creatures and should be used to make all our moral decisions, believed that if a principle of action could not logically be extended to all agents, then it should not be used. For example, the principle or maxim of the action of stealing money from a friend might be "I should steal money from a friend when I need to buy something." But if this principle were to be universalized, the reason for acting breaks down. If everyone stole money when they needed to buy something, no one could be confident that their money would be safe. The whole notion of property would break down under universal conditions of theft. Thus, Kant argued, there is an obligation not to steal. O'Neill agrees with this:

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> The simple thought that justice demands principles on which others too could act has powerful implications for the range of capabilities that might be compatible with justice. For example, norms or principles of injuring others plainly cannot be regarded as norms or principles for all… In particular, extremes of poverty, dependence, social isolation, overwork, and patriarchy, which burden so many women in poor, and even in less poor, economies are shown to be unjust ("Justice," 149).

Thus, for O'Neill, it is the principles of actions and fulfillment of obligations which ensure capabilities will be available to everyone. In this she differs from Shue—for he believes that rights have the strongest claim on us. She will also differ from our next thinker, Martha Nussbaum, who believes that we should look to the target of "the good." O'Neill argues that both of these two goals are too vague and too idealistic ("Justice,"145). It is easier to formulate consistent principles than it is to do the same with institutions (as with Shue) or lives (as with Nussbaum) (O'Neill, "Justice," 146-147). Thinking in terms of principles is more efficient, because it hits at the root of problems; though other systems may address the same problems that Kantian ethics does, they do not make persons think about other persons as effectively as Kantian ethics does. O'Neill believes that the best way to protect the vulnerable is to respect our obligations to them and to empower them, providing them with the agency to choose principles for themselves ("Justice," 150).

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On the question of capabilities, O'Neill fares rather well. Though capabilities are not her central focus (as will be the case with Martha Nussbaum), she pays quite a bit of attention to them and restructures Kant's view using the language of functionings and capabilities. O'Neill seems to see her theory as compatible with capabilities and perhaps as better at ensuring capabilities are available to all, but the extent to which capabilities are a central value for her is unclear. Much of her work focuses on obligations and autonomy rather than capability. Indeed, she seems to see capability as a corollary to these two concepts. She combines the notions of autonomy and capability to a degree; she writes that "a Kantian approach to autonomy is likely to be critical of forms of day-today autonomy that jeopardize capabilities for action, and in particular of those that jeopardize the meager capabilities of the most vulnerable" (O'Neill, Justice, 151). O'Neill is attempting to merge

or absorb capabilities into the Kantian notion of autonomy. For O'Neill, the concept of capabilities is not central, but a subsidiary concept that helps to support and reinforce her central arguments, which are for a modified definition of autonomy, a Kantian concept of principles willable for all, and fulfillment of obligation as superior to rights-based discussion. For example, O'Neill does not want persons to be manipulated or injured and thus suffer a loss of capability, but her concern is not for capabilities *qua* capabilities, but for the fact that manipulative or injurious actions resulting in capability loss are not willable for all. Whether or not this is a serious problem for O'Neill's position on capabilities is ambiguous. While not a central concern for her, she does make a convincing argument that a Kantian view can incorporate capabilities well.

What of O'Neill's position on gender and diversity? O'Neill has written much about how women's rights should be incorporated into Kantian theory. She sums up her views on the matter in "Women's Rights: Whose Obligations?":

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> As long as some people, and today it is often (but by no means only) women, and especially poor women in poor economies, have fewer resources and carry higher burdens of others' dependence, as long as they are vulnerable in ways in which others are not, a case may be made for allocations of obligations which fall more on those who have more resources or carry lower burdens or others' dependence and consequently have greater capacities. This, however, is not a case for differential rights for women, except in the area of maternity services and the like. It is a case for allocations of obligations to deliver goods and services that take account of realities of different sorts of lives (O'Neill, *Bounds*, 111).

This quotation describes O'Neill's views on diversity and women's rights quite well. O'Neill admits that she is skeptical about the claims of feminist ethicists that men and women have different moral voices; she does not want to exclude women from her strong

claims about justice and obligations, and neither does she believe that talking about ethics in terms of justice is oppressive (O'Neill, *Bounds*, 106-108). Thus, while O'Neill is clearly committed to justice and rights for women, she advocates incorporating women in traditional ethical theories rather than revolutionizing ethical theory itself

Martha Nussbaum and Human Flourishing

Martha Nussbaum is an Aristotelian feminist philosopher. Her strategies for dealing with international poverty differs from both Shue's and O'Neill's views. Nussbaum does not focus on the rights, obligations, or principles of action for human beings. Instead she is concerned with "the good" and human flourishing. She is disturbed by approaches like O'Neill's which "asks us to abstract more or less totally from the content of the lives of the individuals we are asked to imagine" (Nussbaum,

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"Commentary," 326). Nussbaum is part of a large and resurgent movement in ethics to revive the ethical views expressed by Aristotle and adapt them for a modern context. Nussbaum is very concerned with human capabilities, and indeed has collaborated with Amartya Sen on several occasions. She believes that Aristotelian ethics is particularly suited to the capabilities perspective, since Aristotelians are seeking "an account of the most important functions and capabilities of the human being, in terms of which human life is defined" (Nussbaum, "Capabilities," 73). By this she means that all creatures that are human beings must possess certain capabilities in order to fall in the class "human." For example, she argues that we could not recognize a being who did not have to eat to survive or who could not feel pleasure or pain as human (Nussbaum, "Capabilities," 76-77).

Nussbaum has created a detailed list of the various basic characteristics and capabilities of human beings.

While the details of Nussbaum's definition of human beings (she resists the term "persons") are not of immediate interest here, her "second threshold" of capabilities is. Nussbaum believes that one set of functional capabilities, the first threshold, is necessary in order for a being to be human, but she also defines a second threshold of capabilities which are necessary for a human being to possess in order to be considered to have a good or flourishing life (Nussbaum, "Capabilities," 81). These are the capabilities that we should focus on making available to all people, particularly the impoverished. Examples of capabilities in the second threshold range from "being able to have good health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter" to "being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities" (Nussbaum, "Capabilities," 83-84). Since we are seeking the good, Washington and Lee University we ought to work to ensure that all human beings have the capabilities which are necessary for a good and flourishing life. Thus, Nussbaum argues with Sen that policy should focus on providing human being with capabilities.

It is clear that Nussbaum has a well-developed understanding of human capabilities. Indeed, her whole approach to what it means to be a human being is based around the notion of capabilities. Further, she defines the central goal for human beings, to flourish and attain "the good," around capabilities as well. She believes that capabilities are universal for all human beings, whether they realize it or not. Unfortunately, "the poor and deprived frequently adjust their expectations and aspirations to the low level of life they have known. Thus they may not demand more education, better health care" (Nussbaum, "Capabilities," 91). Whether or not persons express the desire for certain capabilities, to

truly flourish, they must have the capabilities, even if they choose not to capitalize on them. Such a universalist assertion is indicative of Nussbaum's strong emphasis on the commonalities that all human beings share. Nussbaum fears that a relativist position would allow for the preservation of cultural traditions that oppress women in the developing world, for example (Nussbaum, "Capabilities," 92). She references Catherine MacKinnon's assertion that "being a women is not yet a way of being a human being" and believes that rejecting oppressive cultural traditions that limit capabilities for women will be a step forward towards including women in the category of human beings. Indeed, she believes that traditional philosophical theories like those of Aristotle are capable of expanding to incorporate women in their originally androcentric views.

This brings us to our second question: how does Nussbaum hold up against the challenges of gender and inequality? Here, the answers are mixed. It is clear that

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Nussbaum is a devoted feminist. Her universalist views are in many respects based on her views that all women everywhere should be entitled to the capabilities they need to flourish as human beings. She is prepared to reject or chastise cultural traditions that deny women capabilities. She is careful to note that racial or gender subordination in society "is itself a kind of capability failure" (Nussbaum, "Capabilities," 86). She points to Sen's research on the numbers of "missing women" in societies where subordination denies women basic nutritional and health needs as an example of how capabilities are affected by sexist practices (Nussbaum, "Capabilities," 90). On the other hand, Nussbaum seems to deny certain aspects of human diversity. While she does reject Susan Moller Okin's assertion that there is "a deep and growing tension between feminism and multiculturalist concern

for protecting cultural diversity," she could probably be a bit more sensitive to cultural diversity (Okin 10 and Nussbaum, "Plea," 105).

Yet where Nussbaum runs into real problems is in her analysis of gender. While she is right that men and women share the same basic set of functionings and capabilities and should be afforded equal capabilities, she seems to be skeptical about the whole notion of gender. For example, she asks, "how much separation of function is really suggested by women's childbearing, especially today?" (O'Neill, Capabilities, 100). She does not seem to be convinced that men and women are really that different. She does not believe there is any reason to think that men and women have predispositions towards developing certain capabilities, though she admits that culture may recommend different capabilities for those of different genders (O'Neill, Capabilities, 102). Indeed, she suggests that the ideal society might be one where men and women became more similar and developed all of the same capabilities (O'Neill, Capabilities, 104). She also seems to view gender as a problem to be eliminated; she notes that "seeing this cultural variety in norms of love, care, and gender presentation doesn't, of course, tell us that we can change anything easily, should we want to. Some biological problems are easier to fix than some cultural problems" (Nussbaum, *Women*, 269). Indeed, her monograph *Women and Human Development* barely addresses the question of gender differences, though it has "women" in the title. In the words of Susan Wolf:

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> "Perhaps, in other words, a genderless world would be wonderful. But I cannot really conceive such a world in any detail, and I haven't any idea of how speculations about the possibility and desirability of eradicating gender altogether could be defended responsibly. At present, our gender so deeply affects who we are, how we are treated by

> others, and how we think of ourselves, that it is difficult to imagine what it would be like for one's sex not to be a deep part of one's identity" (113).

Assuming that gender is irrelevant to functionings and capabilities is a step too far. Nussbaum does very little to support this view. Furthermore, as Wolf points out, it is clear that men and women often do have different needs from one another. Pregnant and nursing women have different biological needs than other women and than men, and there may be an entire list of needs that vary with gender and other relevant situations (Wolf 114). Nussbaum is clearly of the mind that a feminist should not admit men and women are different and that doing so is the first step down the slippery slope of oppression. The next group of thinkers does not share this fear.

Feminist Ethics and Caring

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Now we will turn to yet a fourth approach. This approach is feminist ethics. In the past twenty years, an explosion of philosophers have been to identify themselves as feminist ethicists. Interestingly, many of these thinkers seem to have little if anything in common. "Feminist ethics" has meant many different things for different people, but what has come to be the most widely acknowledged brand of feminist ethics was sparked by the work not of a philosopher, but a psychologist. Carol Gilligan's landmark 1982 book *In a Different Voice* challenged the accepted theory of human moral development put forth by her former mentor, Lawrence Kohlberg (Tong, *Ethics*, 82). Gilligan's thesis—that women and men develop different morally and have different styles of moral reasoning—shocked some, offended others, and inspired a new realm of philosophical discourse.

Rooting their arguments in Gilligan's psychological studies, feminist ethicists reject an androcentric notion of human moral development. Typically, feminist ethicists have

rejected traditional deontological, utilitarian, or liberal justice-based approaches to ethics. Many (though not all) feminist ethicists have adopted some form of virtue ethics. In line with Gilligan's thesis, feminist ethicists have argued that women's moral reasoning and development is very different than that of men. These writers believe that men, who authored the major ethical theories for most of history, have a style of moral reasoning that is rational and reasonable, based on abstract principles. This style aligns well with traditional ethical theories—which of course were written by men! A person who used abstract thought and reason would find Kantian or Rawlsian ethics appealing.

The story goes that men tend to think in terms of what is owed to others, what is fair, or what is just. Because men have traditionally been dominant in society, ethical systems based on these sorts of principles have tended to predominate throughout history. Moreover, traditional ethical systems have been based around the abstract concept of

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"autonomous man," who engages fully in public life. But autonomous man is typically abstracted from private commitments and set up in opposition to other persons (Tong, *Ethics*, 51). Real human beings are not abstracted from commitments or purely autonomous. In particular, "autonomous man" s male, which has often meant that traditional ethical theories have ignored the differing experiences of women. Women's ethical work has often focused on building and maintaining strong relationships with others (Tong, *Ethics*, 53). Thus, it may be that traditional ethical theories do not employ *human* concepts of morality, but *male* concepts of morality (Tong, *Ethics*, 87). To replace this one-sided system, Gilligan and others have recommended a more bifurcated system that provides added respect for women's moral development and for the importance of human relationships.

Feminist ethicists have argued that women take a much different pattern of moral development. Intuition, concrete relationships, and the principle of caring often influence women's moral reasoning. In a moral dilemma, rather than asking what justice owes a person, a woman might ask what her relationship to the person asks of her, or think about what a caring person would do in the situation. Feminist ethicists have posited that a society that was based around a more feminine moral reasoning, or at least tried more vigorously to include aspects of feminine moral reasoning, might look much different from the liberal democracies of the West. Many feminist ethicists have further elaborated the rough framework suggested by Gilligan to include "the virtue of caring" into a broader system of virtue ethics.

Other women philosophers have been disturbed by such arguments, however (Tong 89). They worry that Gilligan's research was flawed and that it is not appropriate to transpose empirical scientific studies into philosophy. Further, they are concerned that promoting a different style of ethics for women could have negative results for the women's movement, legitimizing misogynist claims that women are physically or mentally inferior to men and not suited to participate in certain realms of society. They point to extreme forms of feminist ethics, such as maternal ethics, and argue that promoting caring and mothering as the ideal way for women to relate to others reinforces age-old stereotypes and encourages women to be doormats. They also are concerned by the work of separatist lesbian feminists, which argues that women's moral style is superior to men's and that women should be free to form their own interdependent community.

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However, it is certainly the case that

> The world would be a much worse place tomorrow than it is today were women suddenly to stop meeting the physical and psychological needs of those who depend on them. *Just*

> *because men and, yes, children have more or less routinely taken advantage of some women's willingness to serve them, does not mean that every woman's caring actions should be contemptuously dismissed* as yet another instance of women's 'pathological masochism,' 'fear of success,' or passivity' (Tong, *Ethics*, 103, emphasis added).

Therefore, there is ample middle ground for feminist ethics to tread. As Virginia Held writes, the feminist emphasis on caring and intuition is not incompatible with reason. She notes that "many defenders of an ethics of care favor reflective care over blind care" (Held 71). Furthermore, the ethic of care is not incompatible with the notion of rights or justice:

> the right not to be assaulted, for instance, should protect women and children in the family, and women should assert rights to a more equitable division of labor in the household. But those who advocate an ethic of care have a very different view from liberal individualists of what gender relations, relations between children and parents, relations of friendship, and human relations generally, should be like even when these rights are extended to those previously left out from the protections they provide (Held 72).

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It is the case that the best aspects of traditional ethical theory can be incorporated into a virtue-based ethic of care. Though some feminist ethicists see justice as an oppressive aspect of traditional ethical theory, most do not. Indeed, perhaps it is the case that both women and men should work to develop both kinds of moral understanding, justice-based and care-based. However, feminist ethics remedies the total neglect of care in traditional ethical theories, recognizes women's moral contributions, and gives us a more diverse and realistic picture of moral life.

Now to evaluate feminist ethics and its position on capabilities. While I did not cite an instance of a feminist ethicist discussing capabilities, there is no reason that feminist ethics is incompatible with the compatibilities perspective. First of all, feminist ethics

brings to the table a real sense of caring and concern for the realities of persons' lives. Such a view would clearly be cognizant of the capabilities that a person possesses and seek to remedy any deficits in capabilities that it finds. Indeed, Martha Nussbaum's view of capabilities as an intrinsic part of what it means to be human is itself not incompatible with feminist ethics (though many of Nussbaum's other views are in tension with feminist ethics, including her universalism and her apparent rejection of gender difference). Indeed, feminist ethics is a more of a rough theoretical framework than a fully articulated theory in the sense that Kant's or Rawl's theories are. Feminist ethics is a perspective that has a great deal of conceptual flexibility; its message can be incorporated into other, broader ethical theories (such as virtue ethics), or it can be modified or fleshed out in order to include specific values or concepts that an author values. Thus, it makes sense for feminist ethicists with an interest in international poverty to give thought to the ways in capabilities affect human relationships and lives. It is clear that a feminist ethicist would be concerned about capabilities violations not only in terms of rights and obligations, but in terms of the devastating effects that capability deficits can cause in human lives and relationships. Indeed, feminist ethics may do a better job of recognizing capabilities deficits: "Philosophy's revered Ideal Observer—and also some of the greatest philosophers—failed in their abstract moral vision because they failed in their daily moral vision. Not seeing the oppression that surrounded them, they shaped an abstract ethics that may have served to protect the interests of those in power" (Tong, *Ethics*, 229). Feminists ethics are *looking* for capabilities deficits in a way that traditional ethical theories are not.

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Of course, feminist ethicists have a keen sense of the importance of human diversity and gender differences. The whole point of feminist ethics is to recognize and

acknowledge differences in human moral understanding. More than any of the other theories we have examined, feminist ethics displays a commitment not only to recognizing and remedying the sources of oppression in our society, but to showing respect for cultural traditions and gender differences. Martha Nussbaum fears that feminist ethics takes a step too far; she fears that voyaging into "relativism" means that women will have little ground to stand on when they want to protect women who are being oppressed due to cultural tradition or exploitation of gender roles. However, this is manifestly not the case. Just because women may develop a different moral understanding than men, does mean that feminist ethicists must blindly accept it when their moral understanding is exploited to oppress or use them. For example, Annette Baier greatly values trusting human relationships, in particular the mother-child relationship (Tong, *Ethics*, 177). But she does not advocate blind trust; she emphasizes that "we must know when not to trust as well as when to trust. Although we cannot construct a moral network if we are always looking over our shoulders for someone to stab us in the back, we should not ignore the scrap of the knife between our shoulder blades either" (Tong, *Ethics*, 179). Feminists ethicists are not advocating that women care and care and care and receive nothing but oppression in return. It is true that they are advocating that the care women have always demonstrated be valued, but they are arguing this in a context that is always forward-looking and against all forms of oppression. Feminist ethicists can still argue for women's right and for justice for all persons, but they can also do a better job of understanding the true diversity of the human community.

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The Crux of the Matter: The Interaction of Ethical Theory with International Poverty

Each of the approaches—rights-based, Kantian, Aristotelian, and feminist ethics—has advantages. As noted above, many of the recommendations that these theories make for remedying international poverty will in the end be quite similar. What often looks like an unbridgeable divide on the level of theory will end up producing very like-minded results and policies in the step of real-world implementation. However, there are real differences in the way the approaches end up working that should be highlighted and discussed. In order to do this, we will examine how each theory might handle the problem of the oppression of poor women in a third-world country.

First, let us look at Shue's view. Shue's primary concern is basic rights. Thus, in looking at the lives of women in a third-world country, he would first look to see if their basic rights are being fulfilled. He would examine the type of government present in the country, whether or not citizens of the country had basic freedoms, and whether or not citizens of the country received at least minimal nutrition and health care. When faced with a country in which oppression of women was widespread, Shue would look at what sorts of specific rights were being violated in the situation. Then Shue would recommend several steps, in line with the duties to avoid depriving, to protect from deprivation, and to aid the deprived (Shue 60). In particular, he would place particular importance on designing new institutions for that country which would prevent oppression and inequality (Shue 159). If the government of the country, is failing to prevent violations of human rights against women, he might recommend that other Western nations intervene, perhaps through advice or demands made to the government of the country. He might also recommend aid to the women of the country in order to alleviate their plight. However, much about Shue's view is unclear. Since he devotes little or no time to discussing

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equality or oppression, it is hard to understand what he might recommend. Unlike such subsistence rights such as adequate nutrition which can be satisfied by food donations, gender-based oppression is more like Shue's participation rights: it is hard to fulfill our obligations to protect such rights without instituting vast cultural changes. Thus, it is unlikely that Shue would have specific recommendations. As he himself admits, he provides only theoretical frameworks, and expects young idealists and policy-makers to devise implementation (Shue, "Seminar").

What about Nussbaum's recommendations? Nussbaum provides us with an excellent model of what her steps for action for would be in *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. In the book she traces the lives of two Indian women through a series of ethical arguments. Her first question would be about the capabilities of women in our third-world nation. Though the two women had very different life experiences and personalities, each found ways to relieve her experiences of oppression by utilizing various resources in her community. Nussbaum believes strongly that there should be a universal standard of the good, and that every person, male or female, should be entitled to a flourishing life. She notes that though the two women do not recognize all of the capabilities that Nussbaum's model poses, this does not affect her theory: "neither of the women seems to value education in quite the way the list does…that does not mean that the list is a bad way of capturing, for normative political purposes, what is lacking in their situations" (Nussbaum, *Women*, 109). She also notes that India's Constitution and system of laws incorporate a strong sense of women's equality, so clearly the problem of oppression and deficient capabilities for women is complex and could not be solved just by legislation or governmental action alone. As O'Neill notes, it is unclear how we reach the

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lofty target of "the good" that Nussbaum has set up (O'Neill, *Justice*, 145). But it is clear that Nussbaum realizes that alleviation of oppression will take more than the efforts of government alone, though she certainly seems concerned with the effects that a helpful government can have in instituting change and alleviating oppression. She praises the efforts of a micro-loan program in the life of one of the women, for example (Nussbaum, *Women*, 107). Nussbaum might also discuss ways in which feminist activists in developed nations should support the efforts of women within a country to build flourishing lives for themselves. Nussbaum also places a certain level of responsibility on the oppressed themselves; she notes how well the women in her study used the resources that were available to them. Nussbaum believes that it is only natural for persons to desire greater capabilities and work to achieve them. Yet, she will also argue for providing capacities for persons that do not demand them. So, the actions of activists and governments must not be discounted. Unfortunately, Nussbaum provides very little evidence of what her vision of the appropriate relation of a developed nation to a developing nation might be. Presumably, she will argue that developed nations have a duty to assist developing nations in providing flourishing lives for all persons.

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O'Neill's body of work deals more specifically with what the obligations or duties of persons or nations to those in developing nations might be. Indeed, such obligations are an overarching concern for O'Neill. O'Neill has discussed the difference between perfect and imperfect duty in terms of international poverty, as well. She sums up her views thusly: "Kantian imperfect duties are *selective* obligations. Respect [a perfect duty], since it is mainly a matter of omission, can be universally accorded; beneficence and development of talents and other capacities cannot" (O'Neill, *Faces*, 160). Matters like justice and respect

are primary duties for O'Neill, but beneficence is not. In contrast with Shue, she sees a difference between obligations to protect rights and obligations to protect rights to good and services (O'Neill, *Bounds*, 104). O'Neill is thinking in terms of obligations, and she does not want to require persons to have to sacrifice their own motives and desires in order to solve all the problems of developing nations. However, she does believe that governments and persons do have *some* obligations to persons in developed nations. She writes that "a just global economic and political order would then have to be one designed to meet material needs… it would be embodied in economic and political structures which do not institutionalize coercion or deception and so respect rationality and autonomy" (O'Neill, *Faces*, 149). Indeed, she goes a step farther, and unlike Shue, she describes a set of features which any global institutional arrangement would have to have (O'Neill, *Faces*, 149-150). Thus, it seems that O'Neill would demand a great deal of action on the part of

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institutions or agents in order to protect basic liberties and human rights, but would not require as much action to provide food aid. She writes: "justice requires institutions that coerce to limit coercion" (O'Neill, *Bounds*, 139). This is strong language, and O'Neill seems to back up her principles with a commitment to ensuring justice at a high cost. She also is clearly concerned about oppression of women in developing nations; she writes that women in developed nations cannot be viewed as fully autonomous agents, since in developing nations it is often the case that "family structures can enable, even impose, forms of deception, coercion and domination. Where women are isolated, secluded, barred from education or wage-earning, or have access to information only via the filter of more powerful family members, their judgment is weakened and their independence stunted" (O'Neill, *Bounds*, 165). Thus, it seems that O'Neill would argue for great obligations to

ensure justice and in particular justice for women in a third-world nation. Since she sees beneficence as a imperfect duty, it would be up to the discretion of individual agents to donate aid to fulfill subsistence needs, although she does believe agents at the very least have a duty to design institutions that protect the autonomy of vulnerable persons.

Finally, what would feminist ethics recommend for dealing with sexist oppression in an impoverished nation? In a brilliant essay entitled "A Millennial Feminist Vision," Rosemarie Tong, drawing on the work of Vandan Shiva and Maria Mies, provides some insight into how feminist ethicists in developed nations should relate to Third World women:

> First-world women who are sincere about eliminating all forms of human oppression, beginning with gender oppression, will need to do more than talk about the need to help Third-World women achieve all that is rightfully theirs as women… First World women must… be prepared to give up some of their luxuries so that Third-World women can attain most of their necessities… Third-wave feminists must take the lead in living more simply so that life on earth can continue through the next millennium and more. Bluntly put… if third-wave feminists from the First World are really serious about ending all oppression, beginning with gender oppression, they must stop being oppressors (Tong, *Vision*, 187).

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Clearly, feminist ethicists believe that persons should *act* on the emotions of caring and concern that come to them. Yet at the same time, feminist ethicists must not neglect that the "reminder that caring may be carried out in better or worse ways permits a clearer analysis of what can go wrong when Western donors respond to media images of starving children by sending off checks to the relief agencies that implore viewers to 'show that they care'" (Brender 210). People must not only "care-about", they must actively "care-for" by engaging in finding solutions to the problems that are at the base of international poverty

(Brender 210). Humanitarian response alone is not enough to ensuring that caring is being done; feminist ethicists must also remain open to political solutions to oppression around the world (Brender 211). Thus, the accusation that is often leveled against feminist ethicists—that "mere" caring does not ensure that decisive action will be taken—does not suffice. Rather, caring compels persons to seek solutions. As noted in the discussion about feminist ethics, justice can be seen as a complement, rather than a contradiction, to the caring advocated by feminist ethicists. Feminist ethicists would advocate that concerned, caring persons take actions to relieve women's oppression in a developing nations in several ways. Not only would these persons be asked to engage actively in finding institutional solutions to poverty in a country, they would be asked to donate time and money and perhaps actual service to helping relieve the oppression. Of course it is the case that persons have limited time and resources and could not devote all of their time or

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resources to relieving oppression. However, feminist ethics trusts agents to make moral decisions about which moral concerns to act on. Importantly, feminist ethics also would seek institutional solutions to oppression that are more sensitive to the real experiences and values of women in developing nations, and that come from care-based thinking rather than thinking that asks "What is the bare minimum we can achieve?" Feminist ethics looks to the realities of human lives in formulating its recommendations. It asks, "What can I, as a fellow human being, do to care for or meet the needs of this person?" This style of thinking is not only more realistic, it is more intuitive and *will end up accomplishing more* because it does not abstract from real life. It is a truly accessible moral theory and one that can enable persons to make connections across the vast variety of human experience.

Concluding Remarks

It is evident that each of these theories provides something unique and helpful to the discussion of women and international poverty. Many of them in the end provide similar solutions to the challenges of international poverty. However, it should be clear by now that only of these theories satisfies the challenges posed both by the capabilities perspective and gender and diversity perspective. Feminist ethics is a theory that can address both capabilities and gender sufficiently. Furthermore, it forces persons to make connections between their lives and the lives of others. It accepts that there are many different ways of living and allows persons to structure their moral lives in a way that seems intuitive to them. At the same time, it does not neglect to address oppression and human rights. International poverty policymakers should pay heed to the theories of feminist ethicists. There seems to be very little evidence that they have yet done so. Let us hope that they will.

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