Most people no doubt agree that living in dire poverty is a very bad thing, and so they are disturbed to learn that 1.3 billion people in the world do. What moral claims, if any, does this situation make on the world’s comfortable people? It can be disagreeable to think about the question, since if you answer it by doing little you may feel guilty, and if you answer it by doing a lot you may find yourself deprived of many things you thought you wanted, needed, or were entitled to.

Peter Singer’s 1972 article “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” argued strikingly for a moral obligation to give unto others until giving more would make the donor as badly off as the recipients. Two years later, in Anarchy, State, and Utopia, Robert Nozick effectively denied any obligation to aid others. These positions set off the familiar debate among philosophers over whether and how much comfortable individuals are morally obligated to act to alleviate poverty, global or local. Despite the important contributions Singer and others have made and their influence on my own thinking, at a certain point I tired of this debate and the epicycles it induced.

One reason is that I don’t believe the concepts of duty and obligation—are very central in contemporary moral philosophy—are very helpful in describing or fixing our responsibilities in this realm. That’s in part because of their yes/no, on/off character, suggesting a bright line where none is available. And the going moral approaches—utilitarianism, Kantian deontology, virtue ethics—are so open to interpretation as to be compatible with a very demanding morality, a pretty lax one, and everything in between. A pluralistic mix-and-match doesn’t help solve the problem either.

I began to think that the familiar debate was asking the wrong question. We don’t need a philosophical theory to become convinced that the current distribution of wealth is for a variety of reasons repellent and indefensible. So instead of asking how demanding morality is we should ask how to make poverty alleviation less demanding. Rather than determining precise individual duties, we should figure out how to channel human tendencies in the right direction. While some maintain that (as Samuel Scheffler puts it) Morality Demands What It Demands—and if we don’t live up to its demands that just shows our deficiencies—I argue that when we have reason to think these “deficiencies” are nearly impossible to eradicate, we need to work around them. So it’s not only unrealistic but unreasonable to expect too much of ordinary mortals.

One crucial part of the solution is to change the focus from individual duties to the behavior of groups. For a variety of reasons, acting together with others is less demanding on individuals psychically and materially, even if under some description each individual performs the same action.

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We do and feel what others around us do and feel, and we judge our own level of well-being and
deprivation by looking around us. You need a car when most others in your community drive cars, thereby undermining the public transportation system. You want shiny new gadgets because you see them and they're pretty. You feel cramped in a two-bedroom apartment because you've always lived in a big house. Another central reason concerns status. Many people wrongly think *only* of status-seeking when considering why we do as others do—and they usually disapprove. As Adam Smith famously explained, however, concerns about status should not always be condemned as vanity: it is self-respect, not vanity, that requires that we have certain things others around us have. In Smith’s day the bare minimum was leather shoes and linen shirts for anyone who would be seen in public.

Deprivation, in other words, is often relative. From the significance of relative deprivation, captured in these examples, it follows that if we can induce collective change we can avoid making excessive demands on individual human will and character. Economists such as Richard Easterlin have shown that ratcheting consumption up does not increase happiness. A corollary is that ratcheting collective consumption down in rich countries need not make a significant dent in people’s well-being. (There are, of course, other reasons people should want to abate climate change.) The effects of isolated individual efforts to reduce energy consumption are so tiny they are likely to dampen individuals’ motivation to act. But equally important is that the costs to individuals decline if they act together rather than alone. A general policy to produce smaller, more fuel-efficient cars may lower their price. Drivers of small cars risk less injury and death if fewer behemoth vehicles hog the road. Roads last longer when lighter vehicles drive on them. Social policies and publicity promoting small cars can reduce the status value of environmentally offending ones.

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In theory, engaging in political action, lobbying leaders and the electorate, and supporting appropriate legislation could consume a lot of a person’s time and energy. What Oscar Wilde is supposed to have said about socialism applies: the problem with political action is that it takes too many evenings. If so, this recommendation might seem ensnared in the “demandingness problem” I have been laboring to escape. On the other side, some might think the suggestion to support collective solutions asks too little of people rather than too much.

There’s no straightforward answer to the question “Just how much is a person morally responsible for doing?” But these sorts of political efforts do not require the same kind of will-power or virtue that parting with large chunks of one’s salary and material possessions do. For most people, contributions to political causes, willingness to sign letters and petitions (almost effortless now with the internet), and occasional participation in political events do not understand how people can advance not only their own interests but also the interests of others.

Support and promote good policies. Appropriate legislation and social policies can ensure and sometimes enforce collective action. Consider climate change, which will harm the poor in poor countries most. Social policies and publicity promoting small cars can reduce the status value of environmentally offending ones.
demand a great deal—and in fact bring their own satisfactions.

Consider the company you keep. Because it’s easier to act when others around us do too, we should take care to consider the company we keep. What neighborhood should you move to? Which church, synagogue, or mosque should you join? Such decisions can have important consequences for your lifestyle and consumption habits. People are deeply influenced by what sociologists call their reference group. If you hang around with others who think about nothing but clothes and gadgets and house renovations, you will find it very difficult to resist becoming preoccupied with these things too. If you live among people less focused on material things, that will almost inevitably affect your own inclinations.

The respect of one’s peers. Status considerations can play an even broader role when we think about how to change behavior. Journalist Tina Rosenberg describes how such considerations can figure at the “demand side,” not just at the “supply side”—among the poor as well as those who might benefit them. The microcredit approach pioneered by Muhammad Yunus (and for which he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006) involves lending very small sums of money to very poor people. Yunus found that ordinary banks would not lend them even small amounts of money; the repayment rate was too low. The Grameen Bank, which he founded in 1983, formed its borrowers—poor women—into groups of five. The whole group had to approve every loan, “and members could only get new loans if their fellow borrowers were current on their repayments. . . . Effectively, the whole group would be held hostage to one delinquent player.” Grameen officials eventually concluded that “it was not the threat to the group that made the women repay their loans on time—it was the simple desire to protect their reputations.” People have reason not only to do what others do, but to care about what others think of them. We can sometimes turn this concern to social advantage—whether among the poor or those who might act to diminish poverty.

Respect and self-respect. Public knowledge is not always necessary to motivate behavior. In two large experiments, an energy company periodically sent customers reports comparing their energy use with that of neighbors who had similarly sized houses. Households receiving the reports made “significant and lasting reductions in their energy consumption.” The information imparted was not public, so acting on it was not motivated by reputational concerns. The subjects internalized the message of others’ lower energy consumption, concluding that if others could do it, so could they.

Experiments about conservation efforts in hotels also show the effectiveness of feedback about what peers are doing. Guests found one of two different signs in their rooms, each attempting to persuade them to reuse their towels. One sign had the headline: “Help Save the Environment” with the following text: “You can show your respect for nature and help save the environment during your stay.” The other sign had the headline “Join Your Fellow Citizens in Helping to Save the Environment” followed by the sentence: “Almost 75% of guests who are asked to participate in our new resource savings program do help by using their towels more than once…” Participation rates for those receiving the second message were 44.1 percent, compared to 35.1 percent for the other sign. In other words, the belief that others were reusing their towels was more effective in promoting participation than the appeal to environmental values alone. And subjects were motivated by others’ behavior even though those who had supposedly conserved were unknown to them. Perhaps even more important, subjects had no reason to believe that anyone (except perhaps the chambermaid) would know whether they cooperated or not.

Designing Choice Situations

The tendency for people to do what others around them do is one notable instance of a more general propensity. Behavior is heavily influenced by particular features of the environment in which people act. Here are a few findings that could be useful in improving the odds that people will act more constructively to alleviate poverty.

Defaults. A striking example is the power of defaults. Employers, governments, and others who offer policies regarding retirement benefits, insurance, organ donation, and other goods can offer opt-in, opt-out, or no default policies. The alternative chosen may have profound effects on people’s decisions. For example, in some countries, including the United...
States and Great Britain, when you get or renew your driver’s license you must choose to become an organ donor; the default is not to donate. In many European countries, the policy is the reverse: consent to donating one’s organs after death is presumed and one must explicitly opt out to avoid donation. In Austria, France, Hungary, Poland, and Portugal, which all have opt-out policies, effective consent rates are over 99 percent. In countries with opt-in policies, consent rates are radically lower—from 4.25 percent in Denmark to 27.5 percent in the Netherlands.

In an experiment, subjects were randomly assigned to either an opt-in, an opt-out, or a neutral system (where one had to make a choice explicitly). They were twice as likely to donate their organs when they had to opt out as when they had to opt in; in the neutral condition they were just about as likely to donate as in the opt-out condition. It’s easy to imagine capitalizing on the psychology of defaults in other contexts that could benefit those in need—for example, an opt-out system on income tax forms for donating a certain amount to reducing poverty.

**Vividness and the abstract.** Another finding that holds out promise for better policies regarding poverty alleviation concerns the power of vivid information. In responding to appeals to aid people in need, individuals respond to a single “identifiable victim” more than to statistics, or even to several “identifiable victims.” Experimental subjects were given the chance to give $5 to the organization Save the Children. In one treatment, subjects saw only an identifiable victim, a girl named Rokia; in a second, they saw statistics about victims of hunger and malnutrition; in a third, they saw both. Not surprisingly, donations were far greater among subjects in the first treatment than in the second. But they were also greater among those in the first treatment than among those in the third. Seeing statistics in addition to an identifiable victim reduced people’s likelihood to contribute. (Perhaps seeing the statistics led respondents to think—irrationally—the problem was too large for them to affect.)

This is not news to charitable organizations—think of the well-known sponsor-a-child programs and, more recently, the approach of microfinance organizations like Kiva that show potential donors specific individuals seeking small loans. One might worry that such tactics do not benefit the vast majority of poor people who are not depicted—empathy has a downside. But highlighting real people is not incompatible with spreading the resources thereby acquired.

Another example of the importance of vivid stimuli is the concrete image of the carbon footprint, which Elke Weber argues has “played an important role in raising awareness among members of the general public” of their effect on climate change. And the possibility of getting immediate visual feedback about one’s fuel consumption (as some new cars allow) can make conservation a game in which consumers compete against themselves or others. Such tools, far from being manipulative, are the opposite: they are better ways to inform people.

**The peanuts effect.** The “peanuts effect” is “the common tendency to put little weight on very small outcomes.” Fundraisers sometimes take advantage of this tendency by telling donors they can make a difference by giving just “pennies a day.” One can imagine more substantial efforts in this direction.

**Precommitment.** People engage in “hyperbolic discounting,” the economist’s way of saying they overvalue present satisfactions and undervalue future ones, and increasingly as these become more distant. Richard Thaler and Shlomo Benartzi designed a program in which people could pre-commit to contribute to a savings-for-retirement program. In one company, those who joined a pre-commit program almost quadrupled their savings rate.

This approach—commit now, but give only later—can also be used to increase charitable contributions. The organization Giving What We Can asks people to publicly pledge to donate at least 10 percent of their income—until they retire—to those organizations they think will do most to reduce poverty in the developing world. The approach capitalizes not only on the effectiveness of pre-commitment but also on the fact that it’s public. Reneging on a public commitment could be embarrassing. As of February 2013, Giving What We Can had convinced 280 people to pledge more than 108 million dollars.

**Loss aversion.** A well-known finding of behavioral economics is loss aversion—also known as the endowment effect—first brought to light by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. People appear to be more averse to bearing losses than they are favorable to acquiring gains; they are more attached to goods...
they already have than they are desirous of attaining ones they lack. But the difference between a loss and a gain is often simply a matter of how a situation is described or framed. Greater attention to these tendencies in the design of policies can constructively change people’s behavior. Thaler and Benartzi’s savings program tied increased savings to pay raises, so savers would never see a loss in their take-home pay. The same principles might work to encourage people to act in others’ interests.

AID IS NOT NECESSARILY A MATTER OF GIVING PEOPLE STUFF—EVEN STUFF LIKE VACCINES AND MEDICINES. SOMETIMES IT INVOLVES HELPING THEM ALTER OPPRESSIVE POLITICAL AND LEGAL STRUCTURES.

The Bigger Picture

The propensities I have described apply not only to self-interested but to other-directed behavior; not only to people in rich countries who might contribute to poverty alleviation but to the poor in developing countries who could serve their own interests more effectively. Rosenberg’s account of women in microfinance lending groups motivated to repay loans at least in part to preserve their reputations is one example of the latter. Another is the use of randomized clinical trials (RCTs)—a method familiar in medicine to evaluate the benefits of drugs in which people are randomly assigned to different “treatments” to see which treatment group fares better. In one experiment, some pregnant women who came to public health clinics in western Kenya for prenatal care were given bed nets, which are extremely effective in reducing the incidence of malaria, while others were sold the bed nets (at varying prices). The experiments established that, contrary to the view of William Easterly and others that people value things more when they pay for them than when they get them free, “increasing the price from zero to seventy-five cents (the going rate for a discounted net from Population Services International) would drive off three-quarters of customers.” RCTs have also been used to find ways to improve school attendance in developing countries. Experiments in western Kenya showed that giving uniforms to students who didn’t have them cut school absenteeism by more than a third.

A striking set of school attendance experiments concern deworming. Worms infect a quarter of people worldwide, often causing “a general and persistent malaise.” One deworming pill destroys about 99 percent of worms in the body and protects a person for about four months at a total cost of about twenty cents. In an experiment originally carried out in western Kenya that gave deworming pills to students in primary schools, the absentee rate fell by about 20 percent. The results were replicated in India.

RCTs are not always possible or practical. Administering them is expensive, and “some aid projects may bring benefits that cannot be quantified.” Peter Singer describes several such projects, including two supported by Oxfam. One organized Indian ragpickers—women who sift through garbage dumps to find items that can be recycled—so that they could demand higher prices and be protected from harassment. Another helped women in Mozambique get much-needed legal protection. Until recently, girls could be married at fourteen, and were completely under their husbands’ control. The new law, passed by the Mozambique parliament in 2003 and spurred by the project, raises the marriage age to eighteen, allows women to head families, and grants them “rights over the couple’s property after one year of living together in a customary marriage.”

These projects exemplify one of the important counter-arguments to claims that aid programs don’t work. Aid is not necessarily a matter of giving people stuff—even stuff like vaccines and medicines. Sometimes it involves helping them alter oppressive political and legal structures. The hackneyed proverb is “Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime.” It’s hackneyed partly because, as critics point out, it’s unlikely that outsiders will know more about fishing than the locals. But the claim that no one but the locals themselves can ever do anything to improve their situation does not survive scrutiny. Although self-help is an important value, complete self-sufficiency is not possible. No one is nearly as self-sufficient as the propaganda implies some of us are or anyone can be.

It’s easy to be discouraged when we consider the sheer numbers of very poor people. Assessing
progress in reducing global poverty is indeed a glass-half-empty, glass-half-full business. The 1.3 billion people who live below the World Bank’s poverty line of $1.25 a day is about equivalent to the total population of the planet in the late nineteenth century. But in 1820, 75 percent of the world’s population lived below the poverty line; today it’s about 20 percent. Child mortality has declined by more than half since 1970, although the world’s population has almost doubled. If the mortality rate had remained constant, more than 31 million children would have died in 2011 instead of 7 million.

These advances no doubt result from a combination of factors: technological progress, superior organization, learning from past failures, greater resolve, and a better understanding of causal processes, including human motivation. Progress has resulted from myriad successful efforts across agriculture, health, and education, and there are strategies it is widely agreed could make a huge difference. I conclude by mentioning just a few.

Farmers in Malawi work with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to develop drought-resistant crops and better storage facilities that resist spoilage. Geoff Lamb, president of Global Policy and Advocacy at the Gates Foundation, argues that “agricultural development is two to four times more effective at reducing hunger and poverty than any other sector.” The Gates Foundation has committed more than $2 billion to such efforts; it focuses on small farmers.

Insecticidal bed nets are the best protection from malaria, which kills more than a million people a year, 70 percent of them children under five. A net costs $4. The Against Malaria Foundation funds nets and works with partners that distribute them; it also monitors their use to make sure nets are not abandoned.

Only about a third of donors do any research before donating to a charity...Investing even a few hours a year can significantly improve a person’s choices about what to give and what to do.

Diarrhea kills two million people a year. A highly effective preventive measure is to treat drinking water with chlorine. But distributing chlorine to individual households has not worked well. The problem occurs in what Sendil Mullainathan calls the “last mile”: getting people to change their habits and adopt new solutions. Randomized trials in Kenya established that the example of others in the community was a crucial catalyst. With their encouragement and example, free chlorine dispensers at water collection points proved highly successful. Chlorine dispensers, supported by paid promoters, increased adoption by 53 percent, and adoption continued “30 months into the program, even after payments to promoters had ended...The dispenser hardware provides a visual reminder to treat water when it is most salient—at the time of collection.” The experiment confirms two propensities we have noted: the power of the behavior of others to influence what people do, and the importance of salience—the easy availability and visibility of behavioral cues.

A remarkable fact about what works to reduce poverty and enhance economic and human development is what has become known as the “girl effect”:

A girl who doesn’t attend school or marries young...is at far greater risk of dying in childbirth, contracting H.I.V., being beaten by her husband, bearing more children than she would like, and remaining in poverty, along with her family. By contrast, an educated girl is more likely to earn higher wages, delay childbirth, and have fewer, healthier children who are themselves more likely to attend school, prosper, and participate in democratic processes.

In short, “educating girls is one of the most cost-effective ways of spurring development.” We might generalize and speak of the “woman effect”: it is widely believed that public support programs that “put money in the hands of women” rather than men are more likely to benefit children. The explanation need not lie in the greater selfishness of men over women but rather in the norms and social expectations of women’s role.

There’s a lot of information out there about how to eradicate global poverty. Too much, one might think. Not all of it is reliable. But in any case most people spend almost no time or effort deciding how to allocate whatever they choose to give. Only about a
third of donors do any research before donating to a charity, and those who do rely mostly on overhead ratios—a strategy often criticized as simplistic and misleading. Investing even a few hours a year can significantly improve a person’s choices about what to give and what to do. And we don’t have to start from scratch, because other people and organizations have already done a great deal of useful work.

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Notes:

1Smith (1776).
2Easterlin (1974); Easterlin (1995); Robert Frank has made these ideas popular in books like Choosing the Right Pond and Luxury Fever.
4Ayers, Raseman, and Shih (2009), p.3.
7Johnson and Goldstein (2003).
8Small, Loewenstein and Slovic (2007).
11Thaler and Benartzi (2004).
12Giving What We Can (2013).
16Ibid., pp.206-9.
17Singer (2009), p.94.
18Ibid., pp.94-7.
21Kristof (2012).
22World Bank (2012).
26Tembon and Fort (2008).
28Association of Fundraising Professionals (2010); for criticism, see Bialik (2008) and Karlan (2011).

Sources:

Giving What We Can (2013) At http://www.givingwhatwecan.org
In *Distant Strangers*, Judith Lichtenberg shows how a preoccupation with standard moral theories and with the concepts of duty and obligation have led philosophers astray. She argues that there are serious limits to what can be demanded of ordinary human beings, but that this does not mean we must abandon the moral imperative to reduce poverty. Drawing on findings from behavioral economics and psychology, she shows how we can motivate better-off people to lessen poverty without excessively taxing their moral virtue.