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**Book Section:**

Wenar, Leif (2006) *Responsibility and Severe Poverty (draft)*. In: Pogge, Thomas, (ed.) *Freedom from Poverty as a Human Right (forthcoming)*. Oxford University Press .

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Responsibility and Severe Poverty [draft]

Leif Wenar

In *Freedom from Poverty as a Human Right*, Oxford University Press and United Nations Press [2006]

Human rights define the most fundamental responsibilities of those who hold power. In the case of the Nazi officials, or those who ordered the Rwandan massacres, we do not need a theory to tell us who was responsible for human rights being violated. The violators were those who authorized and carried out the atrocities, who failed monumentally in their duties toward their victims.

The subject of this volume presents a more troubling question: Who, if anyone, is morally responsible for acting to alleviate severe poverty? Here our convictions are much less steady. Are impoverished people responsible for improving their own condition? Or are the leaders of their countries also responsible, or the members of the international community, or we ourselves as individuals? When considering this question we tend to have the kinds of reactions—avoidance of the topic, brief enthusiasm, nagging guilt—that indicate that we perceive several strong and conflicting moral factors, but are unsure how to order these factors so as to reach a firm conclusion. Here is where a philosophical account of responsibility might help. What we want to know is how to determine who, if anyone, has moral responsibility for ensuring that each person's human right to an adequate standard of

living is secured. What we seek is a general theory that will tell us how to locate responsibility for averting this kind of threat to individuals' basic well-being.

In order to find such a theory we will here start not with contested questions about human rights, but with familiar cases in which we are certain where to locate responsibility for averting threats. There are after all many threats to our own well-being in everyday life. In everyday life we face threats from traffic accidents, house fires, knives, guns, and toxic household chemicals. For each of these threats we are confident that we know who is responsible for making sure that the threat does not harm us. Moreover, we are surrounded by very young, very old, and very sick people who would not live long if they had to take care of their basic needs themselves. And again, we are certain that we know how to locate responsibility for taking care of these people who cannot take care of themselves. In these familiar cases we have definite answers to the question of who must take responsibility for averting threats to basic well being. If we can find a theory that explains how we go about assigning responsibility in these familiar cases, we will have a theory of responsibility to draw on when ordering our reflections about who is responsible for responding to severe poverty.

When we reflect on how we assign responsibility in everyday cases, it emerges that a single principle is guiding our reasoning in almost every instance. We appear to rely on this principle to locate responsibility in a wide range of situations in which there are threats to basic well being. It is striking to discover that there is a single principle that can explain so much of our thinking about responsibility. Yet the main benefit of finding this principle is not

theoretical; it is practical. The main benefit comes in a better understanding of where we should locate responsibility for securing each human's right to an adequate standard of living.

### 1. Responsibility in Everyday Cases

If you are responsible for something, then in the sense we are interested in it is *up to you* to take care of it. If you do take care of it, you have discharged your responsibility. If you do not, you may be subject to blame or punishment. When we blame or punish someone we do so because he has done something that he was responsible for not doing, or because he has not done something that he was responsible for doing. Yet how do we know where we should locate responsibility for any particular task? How do we determine, that is, who should see to what? Since we are ultimately interested in severe poverty, we can ask a more focused question: How do we determine who should be responsible for preventing some serious threat from damaging the basic well-being of a particular person?

Let us begin with an ordinary example of legal responsibility: the legal responsibility for averting automobile accidents. Two cars are traveling down the expressway in the same lane, one behind the other. Whose responsibility is it to keep the two cars from colliding? Who is it 'up to' to prevent this kind of accident? The obvious answer is that it is the responsibility of the driver of the car in back, not the driver of the car in front, to keep the two cars from colliding. If there is a collision, the driver of the car in back will be cited, and his insurance company will be the one who pays for damages. Yet the ease with which we answer the question of responsibility in this case does not mean that the answer explains itself. Why

after all should we locate responsibility in the trailing driver, instead of in the lead driver—or perhaps in someone else entirely?

The thought that it is the trailing driver who will have *caused* the accident will not help us here, at least if we stick to a philosopher's definition of 'cause.' To a philosopher, the causes of an event are, roughly, all of the factors that contribute to the event occurring. In this philosopher's sense, there is no way to pick out the actions of the trailing driver as especially significant. In a particular case, perhaps the accident would not have happened if the trailing driver had not edged so close to the car in front of him. Yet it may also be the case that the accident would not have happened had the driver of the car in front had not slammed on his brakes. In fact, if we look for everything that contributed to an event occurring, we will quickly collect a huge number of causal factors. It could be that there would have been no accident if the baby in the car in front had not been crying, or if a rabbit had not jumped out onto the expressway in the path of the car in front, or if the trailing driver had not gotten the last-minute phone call that made him late for his appointment. When we say that the driver of the car in back 'caused' the accident, we are not intending this philosophical sense of causation. We are scanning a range of causal factors and picking out the actions of the trailing driver as where responsibility for the accident lies. The question is why we pick out this factor—the actions of the trailing driver—and say that this is the 'cause' of the accident in the sense that we use to assign legal responsibility.

When we reflect on why we hold the trailing driver responsible for an accident in a case like this, we will arrive at the explanation that the trailing driver is the person who can most easily keep the collision from happening. It would be senseless, we think, to assign responsibility to the driver of the car in front—because it is much harder for drivers in front to avoid accidents with cars behind them. The kinds of things that lead drivers would have to do to avoid such accidents—constantly checking their rear-view mirror, speeding up or changing lanes—would greatly increase their risks of getting into accidents with other cars. It is much easier, we think, for trailing drivers to ensure that they keep their distance from the cars that are, after all, right in front of them. This is why we assign responsibility for avoiding these accidents to trailing drivers.

The hypothesis here is that we place responsibility for preventing traffic accidents on the party who could most easily prevent the accident. This hypothesis seems fruitful: it also appears to explain the ‘rules of the road’ for vehicles besides cars. International maritime codes specify that more manoeuvrable vessels must keep out of the way of less manoeuvrable vessels. The captains of vessels which can more easily get out of the way, such as power-driven boats, are responsible for avoiding vessels which can less easily get out of the way, such as sailing ships, and ships engaged in fishing, and vessels not under command.<sup>1</sup> Aviation codes are based on the same principle. The right of way of the sky ranks craft in order of the ease with which they can be controlled: aircraft in distress have the greatest right

of way, then balloons, then airplanes refueling other aircraft, and finally airplanes in normal operation.<sup>2</sup>

The general hypothesis is that responsibility for averting threats to basic well-being should be located in the party who can most easily avert the threat. This hypothesis, when tested more broadly, appears to organize many of our thoughts about responsibility. The world is after all full of potential threats. It appears that we think that the fairest and most efficient way to allocate responsibility for these potential threats is to put the burden on the party who can most easily bear that burden.

Consider the threat of guns. We could say that it is the responsibility of each person to avert gun deaths by always wearing a bullet-proof body suit. Yet this would be burdensome, to say the least. We instead assign responsibility for averting gun deaths to the people who are holding the guns in their hands. These after all are the agents who can most easily avert the potential threats of death that are posed by the guns that they are holding. It is easier to avoid shooting someone than to avoid being shot.

The idea that responsibility for preventing serious harm should be located in the person who can most easily prevent the harm also explains one of our firmest and most general convictions about the location of responsibility. This is the conviction that, in a wide range of cases, competent adults should be responsible for taking care of themselves. If a competent adult edges too close to a cliff edge in broad daylight, or falls asleep while smoking in bed, or leaves the drain-cleaning fluid where he normally puts his mouthwash, we

will say that he had no one to blame but himself for the harms that result. We could assign responsibility for averting these kinds of harms to other agencies, but we do not. Each competent adult is responsible for avoiding a great many threats to his own well-being because he is the agent who can do so at the least cost.

There are of course exceptions to the general claims about responsibility that we have just been discussing. Yet even these exceptions appear to follow the 'least-cost' principle. A driver is in most cases responsible for keeping his car off of the sidewalk—but the driver is not blamed if his passenger suddenly lunges over and wrenches the wheel toward the pedestrians. This is because it is easier for the passenger to keep himself from wrenching the wheel toward the pedestrians than it is for the driver to stop the passenger from doing so. These kinds of exceptions to our general judgments about who is responsible for controlling threats are in fact not exceptions to our principle. They are themselves responsive to our judgments about who is most easily able to control a threat in the circumstances.

## 2. Excessive Burdens

Our ultimate aim will be to apply this hypothesis concerning the location of responsibility to the case of severe poverty. While we are not yet ready to address severe poverty at this early stage, we can see the general principle at work when we study our reactions to Peter Singer's famous example of saving the drowning child (Singer 1972: 229-43). In Singer's example, you notice a child drowning in a shallow pond nearby, and realize that you could save the child by wading into the pond and grabbing him. You have, we think, a responsibility to wade



in and keep the child from drowning. You can, after all, save the child's life, and you need only get your trousers muddy to do so. Saving the child is your responsibility.

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Why is saving the child up to you? You have the responsibility to save the child from drowning because you are the person who can most easily keep the child from drowning. Here, as before, the least-cost hypothesis explains our reasoning. Yet our reactions become less settled when Singer attempts to make a parallel between the pond case and our responsibilities toward the people starving in Bangladesh (Singer was writing in 1971). When Singer makes us feel that helping starving Bangladeshis is really just as easy as saving the drowning child, we are drawn to the idea that we do have a responsibility to avert the threat of starvation that is endangering those people.<sup>3</sup> While Singer has us believing that we can very easily save people from starving, we are pulled toward believing that we must do so. Yet in the back of our minds, or perhaps in the front, is a concern that perhaps we are not the people who can *most* easily avert the starvation. Perhaps primary responsibility for alleviating the famine, at least, does not lie with us. Perhaps there are people closer by who should help instead, or perhaps there are people around us for whom the sacrifice required to help the Bangladeshis would be less costly than it would be for us.

Reflecting on our reactions to Singer's famine example also reveals a new thought, and an important qualification to our central idea. Perhaps, we think, Singer is simply wrong about the facts. Perhaps we are indeed the people who can most easily act to alleviate the famine. Yet perhaps it would very expensive for us to do anything that could help. If the costs

are very high, it might seem simply unfair to burden us with responsibility for alleviating the famine, even if we are the people who could most easily do so. Responsibility, we appear to think, can be negated if costs are too high. If it would be too hard for the people who can most easily avert a threat to avert it, then we do not hold these people responsible.

This is an important qualification to the central idea about assigning responsibility, and we can see it at work even in Singer's case of the drowning child. You are responsible for saving the child if you are the person who can most easily do so—unless trying to save the child would put you at serious risk of drowning yourself. In a situation where attempting the rescue is itself very dangerous, we will not hold you responsible for making the attempt. Of course we have not said how much difficulty or danger will count as 'excessive costs.' Presumably, this depends on the magnitude of the threat in the circumstances at hand. Nevertheless, we are often very clear about what level of cost counts as excessive. In the drowning child example, we are clear that you are not required to put your own life seriously at risk in order to attempt the rescue.

We can find this qualification for 'excessive costs' at work in all sorts of cases. Imagine you are spending the night in a remote cabin in the wilderness when a strange man, obviously dehydrated and seemingly delirious, appears at the fence. If the man calls for water, you might well believe that it is your responsibility to leave out for him at least enough water to sustain him for the night. After all the man clearly needs water, you have a fair amount of water, and there is no one else around even if you had a telephone to call for help. Yet now

imagine that you leave a bottle of water outside for the man, and he proceeds to pour it on the ground and call for more. Here you might think that your responsibility to help the man has run out. The thirsty man appears to take no interest in meeting his own basic needs, and leaving water out for him has not proved an effective way to help him do so. In this situation it might still be true that you are the person who can most easily ensure that the thirsty man gets rehydrated. But what you would have to do to secure his health—capturing him, restraining him, forcing him to swallow the water—would simply be too risky to expect you to do it. You have ‘done enough’ here, and may bear no further responsibility to assist the man, at least while he remains in his current delirious state.

These core ideas—about who can most easily avert threats, and about whether averting a threat would be excessively costly—form the backbone of our judgments about where (if anywhere) responsibility for averting threats should be located. The simple principle that lies behind our thinking about averting threats to basic well-being is that the party who can most easily avert the threat should have the responsibility for doing so—so long as doing so will not be excessively costly. In the next section, we explore two different ways in which this principle is elaborated in our reasoning about responsibility for averting predictable threats to well-being.

### 3. Role Responsibility

In the cases of the drowning child and the thirsty man we apply the principle of responsibility directly. There is a threat to the basic well-being of some individual A, and we assign

responsibility to that individual B who can at that moment most easily act so as to avert this threat (so long as this is not too costly for B). In other cases, we apply the principle of responsibility not directly to individuals, but to individuals based on the general description that they fall under. For example, consider again the traffic case where one car is traveling behind another on the expressway. In our legal system, responsibility for preventing an accident always lies with the person falling under the description of 'trailing driver.' The trailing driver is always legally responsible for avoiding collisions with cars in front of him, even if in some specific, unusual case it would be easier for a lead driver to avert the accident. If there is a collision involving two cars where one was trailing the other, the authorities will not try to determine which driver could most easily have averted that particular accident. Rather, the authorities will always hold the person responsible who falls under a certain general description—'trailing driver'—whatever the particular facts of the case at hand. In this kind of situation, we assign responsibility based on the general description, not based on the actual costs to individuals at a given moment.

It is easy to see why we sometimes assign responsibility based on general descriptions. General descriptions help to define simple and public rules of who must take care of what. Having these simple and public rules makes it easier for people to coordinate their actions, and so reduces everyone's risks. Driving at high speed on the expressway in the middle of a group of cars is potentially a very dangerous activity. The risks of driving on the expressway would be many times greater if each driver, at each moment, had to try to determine whether

he or another driver was responsible for avoiding a collision between their two cars. Traffic rules such as 'the trailing driver is responsible for not hitting the car in front of him,' make it easy for each driver to know what he must do, and so reduce the risks of driving on the expressway to a tolerable level.

How then do we assign responsibility based on general descriptions when we create roles? The answer follows from the hypothesis that we have already seen. We assign responsibility according to the principle of 'least cost,' this time based on costs in the general case. For each type of situation where some person will predictably face a threat to basic well-being, we ask who it will be in the general case who, will most easily able to avert that threat (without being excessively burdened by doing so). In the expressway situation, we have determined that it is generally easier for trailing drivers to avoid accidents with lead drivers than vice versa. So we assign responsibility to trailing drivers. Similarly, we think that it is generally easier for non-distressed airplanes to stay out of the way of balloons than vice versa, so we assign responsibility to the operators of airplanes. And so on.

The traffic-law cases are good examples of how we assign responsibility based on general descriptions. The least-cost principle can also explain assignments of responsibility that define some of our most important social roles. Consider, for example, the care of young children. We know that children will face any number of threats to their basic interests during their early years, from lack of adequate nutrition to accidental self-injury. Moreover, we know that young children will be incapable of avoiding many of these threats themselves. On

whom, then, should responsibility fall to protect young children against the dangers they will predictably face? There are a variety of individuals and groups who could bear responsibility for children. Yet the most popular answer to this question, across many different societies, is that it is the biological parents of a child who should bear most of the responsibility for averting threats to the child.

The ascription of responsibility to biological parents reflects an assessment of relative costs in the general case. Biological parents are assigned primary responsibility for taking care of their children's basic needs because they are, in general, the people who will bear the least costs in carrying these responsibilities through. Biological parents, after all, often seek out the kind of relationship with the child where they are responsible for feeding, cleaning and clothing the child. And even in cases where the biological parents have not sought out this kind of relationship with the child, we tend to think that the parents will be less burdened by the responsibility than others would be, because humans have strong innate desires to protect their own offspring. Of course our rules for the care of children are more complex than simply 'biological parents must assume responsibility,' and later we will consider how some of these complexities can be explained. Yet as a first pass, reasoning about relative costs in the general case appears to be the basic explanation of why we turn the neutral general description 'biological parent' into the socially and legally responsible role of 'parent.'

The example of assigning responsibility to biological parents brings out another benefit of applying the least-cost principle to people as they fall under general descriptions,

instead of case by case. Defining roles make it easier to know what one has to do both in order to take on, and in order to avoid, bearing a certain responsibility. This can be very useful for planning. For many people taking responsibility for the care of a child does not fit into their immediate (or even their ultimate) life plans. With roles constructed as we have them, people can know exactly what they must do in order to avoid having responsibility for caring for a child. They must simply avoid coming under the description ‘biological parent.’ Knowing what one must do in order to avoid burdensome responsibilities at any given time can be very helpful in scheduling one’s activities so as to be able to reach one’s goals.

Of course not all social roles are avoidable. A nation under military attack will draft its young men to be soldiers—it will place primary responsibility for averting the most dangerous threats from the enemy onto those who fit the general description ‘able-bodied young male.’ These young males will typically have little choice in the matter. The least-cost principle explains why it is that young males are selected to fight: they are generally best suited to perform aggressive, physically demanding tasks; they are easier to fit into the bottom of rigid command hierarchies; and they are less likely to have families and careers in progress. This example shows that we sometimes assign responsibility in such a way that it is unavoidable. It also shows, we might notice, that in cases of extreme threat we expect people to bear very heavy burdens of responsibility. When there is a military invasion, the ‘get-out clause’ for excessive costs is very hard for our young males to activate.

We have been examining how we often assign responsibility to roles, instead of assigning it case-by-case. On further examination, it becomes clear that we deal with many serious threats by constructing not just single roles, but systems of roles. For instance, consider the standing threat of house fires. A case by case assignment of responsibility for putting out house fires based on least cost would be burdensome to everyone. Imagine the disruptions and dangers in your life were you responsible for responding to fire alarms whenever they sounded near you. The role-based system of responsibility that we have set up is much more effective. In our system, we apply the least-cost principle to a series of roles, so that each group does what it can most easily do. Those who have income and wealth are responsible for paying taxes to fund the fire service. Those who work in city government are responsible for using these funds to train and equip firefighters. Firefighters are responsible for fighting the fires. The system of dividing responsibility among roles is effective in meeting the threat posed by house fires, the system of roles meeting this threat in such a way that each group of role-bearers faces a relatively low burden.

In modern societies, almost all roles that we create to avert serious threats are parts of systems of roles. This is in fact true even of the roles of 'driver' and 'parent.' Drivers have many responsibilities for averting accidents, but government officials also have responsibilities for maintaining and patrolling the roads so that accidents are prevented. Parents have immediate responsibility for feeding their babies, but officials have responsibility for running the economy in such a way that parents are able to procure food to



feed their babies. When we examine these systems of roles, we will find the least-cost principle always at work. In a good system, each role will be assigned to the group of people that can, because of the general description they fall under, bear the burdens of that role better than could other groups that might be singled out. |

Of course, there is a certain amount of indeterminacy in the application of the principle. There are many roughly equivalent ways to set up traffic laws, child-care arrangements, and fire prevention schemes. Between any two such systems of roles it may not be entirely clear which one imposes the least costs on its participants. What is crucial for all serious threats is that there be some system in place that meets the threat, and that this system is not obviously worse than some other feasible system would be. Serious threats to well-being must be averted, and it is the responsibility of the people who can avert the threats to settle on one system or another for responding to them.

#### 4. Primary and Secondary Responsibility

We have examined the ways in which we assign responsibility for averting threats to basic well-being. We have found that we assign responsibility where it can most easily be borne, except when this would be excessively burdensome. With some 'one-off' threats, like children drowning in ponds, we apply the principle directly—whichever person is closest must help. When we face a more predictable type of threat, we set up a system of roles whereby people falling under certain descriptions are made responsible for what they can do

at lower cost than others. The least-cost principle guides our reasoning about distributing responsibility, both immediately and systematically.

What about when the person responsible fails? What if the person responsible for averting a threat does not, for one reason or another, do so? If we examine our convictions in these types of situations, we will find that the least-cost principle continues to work. If the person with primary responsibility is unwilling or unable to carry through on his responsibility, we assign the responsibility—‘secondary responsibility’—to the person *besides him* who can most easily bear the burden (so long as it would not burden this person excessively). If the person with this secondary responsibility then fails, we look for the person besides him who can next most easily shoulder the costs, and so on. We keep ‘stepping back’ levels to find new responsibility-bearers, until (if ever) we reach a level where fulfilling the responsibility would impose too great of a burden.

We can see this ‘stepping back’ reasoning in action by modifying Singer’s pond example slightly. While walking to work you see a child drowning in a shallow pond not far away. At the edge of the pond, between you and the child, a man sits on a park bench watching the drowning child with an impassive expression. This man is obviously not going to help, although being closer to the child it appears that he could do so more easily than could you. The distribution of responsibility here is still clear. The man on the bench has primary responsibility for wading in and grabbing the child. It is in the first instance up to him to rescue the child. Yet since the man is not, apparently, going to lift a finger, the

responsibility of rescue ‘steps back’ to you. Indeed your secondary responsibility here seems to be just as strong as if the impassive man were absent from the scene.

We reason in the same ‘stepping back’ manner when assigning responsibility to roles. Biological parents have primary responsibility for averting threats to the basic well-being of their children. Yet what if the biological parents prove unwilling or unable to discharge their responsibilities? For instance, what if the parents die? What is the general description of the people who can now most easily look after the child? If there are guardians who have signaled their desire to take the child in these circumstances, the guardian will be assigned responsibility. Beyond this there are no hard and fast rules, but we know where to look. We will look for people who know the child, who are more likely to have some emotional attachment to him or her, who may have experience with raising children, and whose life plans are likely to be least disrupted. We are obviously looking for a family relation, and in our culture grandparents fit the bill. In other cultures, where extended families are bound more closely together, aunts, uncles and more distant relations might also be called on. Nor do we stop with family members to bear responsibility for children. If we do not find a family member willing or able to care for the child, we then step back one more level to vest responsibility for the child in the state.

Now it might appear that this explanation of how the least-cost principle bears on secondary responsibility has failed to register an important distinction. I have said that secondary responsibility vests whenever the primary responsibility-holder is ‘unwilling or

unable' to do what they ought. Yet it may seem to make a big difference whether the primary responsibility-holder is simply not *willing* to do what they should, or whether they are actually not *capable* of it. 'Unwilling' seems unlike 'unable.' This is correct—it can make a big difference to us whether the primary responsibility-holder is unwilling or, rather, unable. But the difference it makes concerns only the appropriateness of blaming or punishing the person with the responsibility. We blame and punish those unwilling to discharge their responsibilities; we excuse those who are unable. Yet the appropriateness of blame and punishment makes no difference to the assignment of secondary responsibility. Whether a primary responsibility-holder is blameworthy or not, or deserves punishment or not, we will still locate secondary responsibility in the person who can next most easily bear that responsibility. You are just as responsible for rescuing the drowning child whether the man on the park bench turns out to be disabled, or simply callous.

The least-cost principle relocates responsibility whenever the holder of primary responsibility fails. It can also happen, of course, that this process works in reverse. Sometimes people become more capable of averting threats. Should the now-more-capable person become the person who can most easily avert the threat, then responsibility will shift to him. This 'reverse' shifting of responsibility can be seen in cases where a person regains responsibility for himself after a period of incapacity. The host of the party who gives the guest's car keys back when the guest has finally sobered up is shifting responsibility back onto the guest himself. We can also see this reverse process at work in our example of

parenting. Initially the parents are primarily responsible for all of the main conditions and actions necessary to ensure, for example, that their child has adequate nutrition—for purchasing the food, preparing the food, cutting up the food, putting the food in the child's mouth, and so on. As the child grows up, it becomes successively easier for him or her to perform these tasks, and so the child takes over primary responsibility for performing them.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed there are two basic strategies for fulfilling one's responsibilities to avert a threat. The first is to avert the threat oneself; the second is to make it easier for someone else to avert the threat. The second strategy is in many cases preferable. For example, consider again the case of house fires. It would, as we have noticed, be very costly for each person to be obliged to respond to the fires that break out around him. It is far better to set up a system whereby a certain small group of persons deals with the immediate threat, while everyone in the larger group is responsible only for ensuring that the small group of persons has adequate resources to do their job. In setting up this system, the majority shifts responsibility for responding to house fires onto a small, specialized group. We use the same strategy when it comes to crime. It would be hard for each of us to police the area around us; so instead we shift many of these responsibilities onto a police force that deals with criminal activities. Individuals shift their responsibilities onto a smaller and better-trained group and retain responsibilities only to pay taxes and to alert the police to crimes that they witness in the course of their normal activities.

Of course, attempting to shift responsibility to another party is only defensible if one reasonably believes that this will be an effective strategy for averting the threat. One may not slip out of one's responsibilities by shifting them to a party that one knows will never act to avert the threat, or by shifting them to a party that one knows will shift them right back. Once again, threats to basic well-being must be met, and the imperative in situations containing threats is that those responsible put in place some system that they believe will be effective in meeting those threats.

#### 5. The Nature of Our Responsibilities

We have found the principle of least cost guiding our thinking about responsibility wherever we have looked. We can take a moment to reflect on the nature of this principle before applying it finally to the case of severe poverty.

On reflection, it appears that our reasoning about responsibility is in one way expansive, but is in the main rather conservative. Our reasoning is expansive in that it recognizes *in principle* no outer limit to the responsibility that one agent may have for another. It is conceivable that—should all intermediate responsibility-holders fail—one individual could become responsible for the basic needs of another who lives very far away and whom he has never met. This potential expansiveness in our reasoning is what gives Singer's examples their power. You may be responsible for wading in to save a drowning child, even if you have never seen the child before. If you really are the person who could most easily keep a child from starving half-way around the world, then you may have the

responsibility to do so even though the physical distance between you is great and your social connection is zero.

Yet our reasoning about responsibility, though potentially expansive, is also conservative in two ways. First, we acknowledge a ‘get-out clause’ for excessive costs. We do not assign responsibilities to individuals or roles when it would be too costly to carry out such responsibilities. Passersby—even unarmed police officers—are not responsible for disarming knife-wielding psychopaths, however much these psychopaths are threatening themselves or others. A sibling is not legally required to donate a lung, even when doing so is the only way to save their sibling’s life.

Second, our reasoning is conservative because it tends to press responsibility for sustaining an individual’s basic needs inward, toward the individual himself. This is the result of the general fact that individuals—and after them those physically and socially closest to those individuals—are often better able than others to take care of their own basic needs. Moreover, relatively ‘distant’ agents can frequently discharge their responsibilities by empowering those closer to the threat in a way that shifts responsibility to them.

If we are looking for a capsule summary of what we have discovered about responsibility so far, we will find one in the adage: ‘With power comes responsibility, and with great power comes great responsibility.’ Any kind of agent who becomes more powerful also becomes more capable of averting threats, and thereby more responsible for making sure that those threats are defused. For example, as a child grows more capable, he becomes more

responsible for taking care of himself. Similarly, a nation that builds up its military for self-defense becomes stronger, but it also becomes responsible for ensuring that its new troops and weapons do not harm (and even that they are available to rescue) the innocent. Citizens who build up institutions of government to the point where these are capable of providing defense and police protection to all citizens may find that these institutions have become efficacious enough that they must now also be used to provide basic health and unemployment insurance to all citizens. Even technology plays a role in locating responsibility, as it lowers costs and so increases power. The advent of mobile phones has made it easier for people to report serious crimes and accidents, and so has increased people's responsibility to make these reports. You are, after all, more blameworthy for failing to report an accident that you see on the motorway if you have a phone in the car, than you are if the nearest phone is five miles behind you.

We should notice also that our reasoning about responsibility, unlike our reasoning about rights and duties, is uncontaminated by distinctions between 'positive' and 'negative.' Least-cost reasoning explains why drivers are responsible for avoiding the cars in front of them, why adults are responsible for not tipping over cliffs, why parents are responsible for taking care of their children, why hosts are responsible for taking keys from (and can eventually return keys to) their intoxicated guests, why taxpayers are responsible for funding the fire service, and why owners of cell-phones are responsible for reporting accidents. Attempting to draw a line between 'negative' and 'positive' responsibilities in these examples, even were this possible, would be attempting to separate responsibilities with a



single rationale. It may be that on particular occasions it would be easy for one person to keep from harming another, but excessively costly for the person to help the other. In this case the first person would have a responsibility not to harm, but no responsibility to help—a ‘negative’ without a ‘positive’ responsibility. Yet this separation is not an exception to what we have discovered about responsibility. It is simply an application of the least-cost principle in a particular type of situation.

Indeed the striking thing about least-cost reasoning is that it appears to give a unified explanation of responsibility for averting threats to basic well-being. It appears to account for our assignments of responsibility wherever we look. If we do find cases that appear to be counter-examples, they will typically rest on one of two kinds of mistakes. The first kind of mistake is to think that least-cost reasoning must always be applied directly, ignoring the fact that assigning responsibility to role-bearers is often a more effective long-term solution. Why, for example, is Bill Gates not responsible for paying for the police and fire services that protect everyone in the country—or responsible for paying at least up to the point where he is no longer the richest man in the country? The last clause gives away the answer to the question. An economic order in which the richest person was responsible for paying to avert threats to all up to the point where he is no longer the richest person would be a much less productive economic order than one with our system of progressive taxation. Such an order would be one in which the police and fire services would be worse at meeting the threats that they will predictably face.

The second kind of mistake is to imagine that least-cost reasoning must be applied within roles. When we divide up responsibility for averting fire deaths, we assign the responsibility for fighting fires to a small professional group. Because of their training and willingness to take the job, this is the group that can fight fires at the least cost to themselves. Yet we do not of course think that whenever a fire alarm sounds it is always the most skilled, most energetic, and most enthusiastic firefighters that have the responsibility to respond. We would lose much of the efficiency that we gained by setting up a fire service if firemen had to determine for each call who within the group could most easily go. Moreover, always sending the most skilled and willing firemen to fight the fire might simply be unfair. We assign responsibility to role-bearers based on relative costs between groups; but using least-cost reasoning to divide responsibility within a group would often be either counterproductive or simply wrong.

#### 6. The Principle of Compensation

There is, however, one genuine and significant exception to our general reliance on least-cost reasoning. There is, that is, one kind of circumstance where we assign responsibility for averting a basic threat to well-being to an agent beside the agent who can most easily avert the threat. These are circumstances that fall under the principle of compensation. Compensation is required where one person has harmed another, and the harm to the victim constitutes a continuing threat to their basic well-being. If I cause a traffic accident that puts you in the hospital, I may be responsible for paying for your long-term care regardless of whether I am

the person who can most easily do this. I am responsible for the care that averts the threat to your well-being because I caused the threat in the first place.

The principle of compensation is important in our reasoning, and we apply it in situations besides those in which basic well-being is at stake. I will be responsible for compensating you, for example, whether the accident I cause breaks your ribs or breaks the front grill on your car. Yet the principle of compensation governs our reasoning in a rather restricted class of cases of threats to basic well-being. Moreover, even when it does apply, it is surrounded by least-cost reasoning on all sides.

First, the principle of compensation only applies when a threat to well-being arises because there has been a harm. Yet most threats to well-being (from cars, weapons, poisons, cliff-edges) do not arise because one person has harmed another. In these cases, the idea of compensation can do no work in locating responsibility.

Second, even when there has been a harm, it is least-cost reasoning that will determine who is responsible for having caused the harm in the morally or legally relevant sense. Recall from our earlier discussion of drivers on the expressway that least-cost reasoning enables us to pick out the actions of trailing drivers as the 'cause' of certain accidents. We pick out the cause of harms by least-cost reasoning, and then hold the harm-causer responsible for the further threats to the victim's well-being that have arisen from that harm (e.g., for the injuries from the accident).

Third, the principle of least cost outweighs the principle of compensation in emergency situations. Say that I fire an arrow far off into the distance, into the park, and when it comes down it goes through the shoulder of the person walking next to you. Who at this moment has primary responsibility for trying to stop the bleeding and getting the victim to the hospital? It is you, because you are closer to him than I am. I will be responsible for compensation only after the emergency is over.

Fourth, the principle of compensation, even when we do apply it, is a shallow or one-leveled principle. Compensation can only locate primary responsibility. If the person who owes compensation is unwilling or unable to compensate, we will as always turn to least-cost reasoning to find the persons or groups who can most easily bear secondary responsibility for helping the victim.

Finally, the principle of compensation becomes less important in our reasoning the less sure we are who is responsible for causing a harm, or indeed whether there has even been a harm at all. Attempting to apply the principle of compensation to this volume's topic, severe poverty, would raise extremely complex questions. A variety of factors can contribute to any given individual's poverty, and it is often very difficult to judge what would have happened had some person acted differently or had particular institutions been differently structured. Moreover, it is likely that many of the people who have contributed to an individual's poverty are no longer alive to do any compensating. Because of these complexities the principle of compensation appears to play little role in our thinking about responsibility for severe

poverty. We can therefore focus again on the least-cost principle, since it applies most fully to the case of severe poverty, which is our central concern.

## 7. Responsibility for Alleviating Severe Poverty

There is one principle, we have found, that explains our beliefs about responsibility for averting threats to basic well-being in almost all circumstances. We rely on this principle when writing ‘the rules of the road,’ when assessing emergency situations, and when constructing our most basic social roles. Indeed with one limited type of exception, we apply this principle everywhere. The least-cost principle—with the qualification for excessive burdens, with the distinction between direct and role-based responsibility, and with the provision for stepping back to secondary responsibility—guides our reasoning about responsibility in almost all everyday cases of threats to basic well-being.

We are now in a position to apply what we have discovered to the difficult question of alleviating severe poverty. Severe poverty is a major threat to basic well-being, and in our world poverty threatens the lives of billions of people. The question we face is who bears what responsibility for ensuring that this threat to these individuals is averted.

Who, then, has primary responsibility for averting the threat of severe poverty? The answer, as we have seen, will depend on the circumstances. The least-cost principle says that, in good conditions, a great deal of this responsibility will rest with the individual himself (or, in the case of children, with the individual’s parents). When resources and opportunities are generally available, each person has primary responsibility for doing what he can to provide

himself with adequate food, clothing, shelter, and so on. Each individual is responsible for taking care of his basic needs because, in good conditions, he is the person who can most easily do so.

In many places, however, conditions are much less than good. Individuals are unable to secure for themselves an adequate standard of living, or can only do so with the greatest difficulty. In these kinds of situations, we should expect our reasoning to 'step back' to the next level, as in the everyday cases above. If an individual becomes destitute and unable to provide for himself, then that individual's family becomes responsible for his care. If a family becomes destitute and unable to provide for itself, then the local community becomes responsible for making sure the family has enough to live on. In each case here we are stepping back to find the agency who can bear responsibilities at least cost.

What if a local community is unwilling or unable to take responsibility for averting the threats of severe poverty to some or all of its members? This is, unfortunately, all too common a state of affairs. Here we step back again to the level of the national government, and so come to arrive at the realm of human rights. Human rights specify the responsibilities of those who hold state power. One responsibility of those in power is to ensure that each person in their territory is protected against the dire threat of severe poverty. This is the responsibility of securing each citizen's human right to an adequate standard of living.

So state officials are responsible for ensuring that each of their citizens can attain an adequate standard of living. When citizens are faced with the threat of poverty, officials can

take either of two courses of action for fulfilling their responsibilities. These two courses of action will be familiar from what we have already seen. First, officials can act to avert the threats directly. For example, if citizens are starving, officials can simply make more food (or the means for securing more food) available. Alternatively, officials can attempt to improve general economic conditions so that citizens are empowered to provide for their own needs. Officials taking this latter course might, for example, work to improve the country's economy so that famines are alleviated and then prevented. Indeed, the two courses of action are not mutually exclusive. Officials can supply food to avert the immediate threat of starvation, while also working to improve the economy so as to avert the threat of famine in the longer term.

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The government of each state has a responsibility for ensuring that the conditions are in place so that each citizen's basic needs can be met. What if the government fails in its responsibility? Should a government be unwilling or unable to carry out its responsibilities, secondary responsibility then falls to the citizens of that country to install a new government capable of meeting the obligations of governance. The responsibility to reform a state wherein citizens cannot meet their basic needs rests in the first instance on the shoulders of the citizens of that state, because in general they are the people who can most easily make these reforms.

Yet there are many cases in which the citizens of a state are unable to institute such reforms, or where it would be excessively costly for them to do so. In some countries it has proved extremely difficult or impossible for citizens to put into place a government that will

meet its basic domestic responsibilities. In these circumstances, the responsibility for sustaining the conditions in which the basic needs of the citizens of this country can be met shifts again to the next level out. This is the level of foreign governments—of the ‘international community.’

The outward expansion of the assignment of responsibility that we have seen so far appears plausible, and there is no principled way to contain the momentum of the argument within the boundaries of nationality. The conclusion that states in the international community can have responsibility for securing citizens of other countries against severe poverty is the clear consequence of the principle of responsibility that has accounted for our firm beliefs in other cases. Some, however, have tried to block the argument at the border. The government of the United States, for example, has never accepted even in principle that it might have responsibility for helping to ensure that the citizens of other countries maintain a decent standard of living. The severe poverty of foreigners, according to the U.S. government, generates not responsibilities, but at most aspirations.<sup>5</sup>

Yet the U.S. and other countries cannot consistently refuse responsibility for acting to secure the rights of foreigners to an adequate standard of living. For the U.S. and other countries have long accepted that they can bear responsibility for averting threats to the basic interests of foreign nationals. Consider, for example, the right to asylum. The right to asylum is by definition a right that obliges governments to protect foreign citizens when certain of their basic interests are being threatened by their own governments. All states, including the



U.S., have acknowledged the right to asylum, and have acknowledged that this human right places them under corresponding duties. So the U.S. government, and all other governments, have already granted the principle that they can have responsibility for meeting threats to the basic well-being of foreign citizens. Furthermore, the right to asylum itself follows from least-cost reasoning, since it is the government of the country of asylum that can most easily avert threat to the asylum-seeker's life.

Nor is it likely that the U.S. can succeed, as it has often tried to do, in making a fundamental distinction between 'civil and political' human rights and 'economic and social' human rights, or in its claim that the former are in some way more genuine than the latter. There have been many attacks on the coherence and significance of this distinction, and we can now see why these attacks have tended to be effective. Our reasoning about responsibility contains no fundamental rationale for making this distinction. The least-cost principle does not differentiate among types of threats, or among the actions that are required for averting these threats. The political/economic distinction has no more weight in our reasoning about responsibility than does the positive/negative distinction. In principle, these distinctions mean nothing.

Moreover, the U.S. and others cannot plausibly resort to blaming the local government in order to avoid their responsibilities. In some poor countries, government officials may be simply unable to act to ensure that their citizens' basic needs are adequately secured. In other countries, government officials may be ignoring the basic needs of their own citizens and

feathering their own nests. The corrupt officials in the second case are certainly reprehensible, and likely deserve punishment for the suffering they are causing. Yet the distinction between unwilling and unable officials makes no difference to the argument about the responsibilities of the international community. As we have seen, whether a primary responsibility-holder is unwilling or unable to carry out their responsibilities can make a difference as to whether or not blame or punishment are appropriate. But it has no bearing on the assignment of secondary responsibility. The assignment of secondary responsibility always goes to the agent or agents who can next most easily bear the costs of averting the threat in question. In this case, secondary responsibility lies with the international community—whether the local government is blameworthy or not.

Of course, it may be that it is more costly for governments to help avert severe poverty in foreign countries than it is for governments to accept some asylum-seekers. We have found that considerations of cost do indeed play a basic role in our reasoning about responsibility, so there is some room for political leaders to allege that meeting the costs of averting severe poverty in our world would simply be excessively burdensome. One version of this allegation would be the claim that the international community has already ‘done enough’—that the means that developed countries have employed to alleviate poverty so far have proved ineffective, and that the most effective alternative means would be simply too costly (recall the thirsty man who pours out the water).

In general, these pleas of excessive costs are not compelling. There is almost certainly some international economic and political system that is now available to us in which no individual would face a high risk of severe poverty, and in which no party was burdened by excessive costs. There is, that is, some feasible system for averting severe poverty where no one is excessively burdened by the responsibility to secure the human right to an adequate standard of living. In fact, it is likely that the problem is less that there is *no* feasible and effective system for dividing responsibilities, than that there are *too many* possible systems.

There are many ways of dividing up responsibility among the actors in the international community so that severe poverty could be averted. For example, one scheme might place more emphasis on regional political solutions, which would require governments to attend more closely to the governance of those countries in their vicinity. Another scheme might place more emphasis on global economic solutions, which would require, for example, more equitable tariff and subsidy levels between developed and developing countries. Another scheme might require major development efforts to be funded by countries proportionately to the size of their national products. No doubt there are other kinds of schemes, and schemes that contain 'mixed' strategies. The costs of moving to any particular one of these schemes for dividing responsibility would not be excessive, but for each scheme the costs would be significant and would fall differently on different parties. Each government prefers the schemes that would be less costly in its own case. This is why we get the kind of finger-pointing and delay on the issue of severe poverty that have become so familiar. The

governments of rich countries will together continue to say that the governments of poor countries should bear more responsibility for fighting corruption. The U.S. and Europe will continue to advance proposals for reducing farm subsidies that each knows will be unacceptable to the other. Every country will favor a different scheme, knowing very well that the lack of coordination will mean that no satisfactory scheme will be put in place.

There are, no doubt, many people who are to blame for this state of affairs, but as always allocating blame is not our main concern. What is important is that the threat of severe poverty, which kills so many, be averted. When someone is drowning, it is no good for the people nearby to begin an argument about who can most easily perform the rescue. The important thing is that something be done so that the person is saved. The leaders of the international community have a responsibility to ensure that some definite scheme be put in place that averts the threats of severe poverty for all. An adequate standard of living is the right of each person, and the international community bears the responsibility for ensuring that—in one way or other—each person's right be secured. Leaders may choose to act more directly—for example, by sending food aid to avert the famines that arise. Or they may, with greater likelihood of success, choose to revise the system of international political and economic institutions so that the threats of severe poverty do not arise in the first place. Or they can opt for some combination of these strategies. What is important is that they decide upon some system that will enable the international community to discharge its responsibility to avert the threat of severe poverty.

## 8. Individual Responsibility for Severe Poverty

The location of secondary responsibility in the leaders of the international community returns us to the adage that with power comes responsibility. Responsibility falls on the nations of the international community because these nations can help without bearing excessive costs. The costs to these nations are not excessive because these nations have been economically and politically successful. States which have been successful find themselves with the resources necessary to assist those states which have been unable to create (or have been prevented from creating) the conditions wherein they can provide for their own needs. The price of success is to ensure that others can also succeed.

Of course, the momentum of the argument does not stop there. We must admit to ourselves that our own political leaders have repeatedly proved themselves either unwilling or unable to discharge their responsibilities for averting the threat of severe poverty around the world. And there is still one level left to which we can step back. This is the level at which we act as individuals. We have seen that in principle there is nothing in our reasoning about responsibility that will keep one person from being responsible for averting threats to any other person, no matter how unrelated or far away. Singer's arguments tried to draw on this fact to reach conclusions about our responsibilities, yet his arguments left out the intermediate steps. We have now traced responsibility back, step by step, until it rests again with us as individuals. This is a conclusion that we must accept if we are to remain true to our most basic principles about the assignment of responsibility.

We are, then, as individuals responsible for doing what we believe will be effective in alleviating and preventing severe poverty. We are responsible for doing this up to the level where it would impose excessive costs for us to do more. As always, these responsibilities can be discharged either directly or by empowering those closer to the problem. We can act to alleviate severe poverty directly by giving our resources to organizations that we believe will be effective in helping those threatened by poverty. Or we can give our political leaders incentives to carry through on their own responsibilities by making it clear that leaders who shirk their responsibilities will pay costs in political support. Or we can combine both strategies. What is important is that each of us actively assume the responsibilities we have for averting the dangers of severe poverty that threaten so many. We must carry out these responsibilities in order to live up to the principles in which we already believe. If we do not act on these responsibilities, we will not have done what it is up to us to do.

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I would especially like to thank Thomas Pogge, Ulrike Heuer, Fabian Freyenhagen, and Henry Richardson for their help with this essay.

<sup>1</sup> United States Coast Guard, 1999. *Transportation Rules—International, Inland*. Washington, DC: Department of Transportation.

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<sup>2</sup> See Section 91.113 of the 'Federal Aviation Regulations,' <[http://www.airweb.faa.gov/Regulatory\\_and\\_Guidance\\_Library/rgFAR.nsf/MainFrame?OpenFrameSet](http://www.airweb.faa.gov/Regulatory_and_Guidance_Library/rgFAR.nsf/MainFrame?OpenFrameSet)>.

<sup>3</sup> Singer says, 'Expert observers and supervisors, sent out by famine relief organizations or permanently stationed in famine-prone areas, can direct our aid to a refugee in Bengal almost as effectively as we could get it to someone in our own block' (1972: 232).

<sup>4</sup> First the parents teach the child how to put food in his own mouth, then how to use utensils, and so on. Once the child is able to perform these basic tasks, the parents no longer have primary responsibility for performing them. During this process, the parents must still ensure that the general conditions exist which allow the child to carry through on these responsibilities by himself. The parents must, for instance, continue to provide the food that the child then prepares and eats. Ensuring that these conditions obtain is still their primary responsibility, because they continue to be the agents who can most easily ensure that these conditions necessary for maintaining the child's basic nutrition are met.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., 'Statement of the United States of America to the 59th Commission on Human Rights; Item 10: Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,' delivered by Richard Wall of the U.S. delegation to the U.N. Commission on Human Rights. April 7, 2003. <<http://usembassy.state.gov/nigeria/wwwhp040703a.html>>.

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