

MORAL OBLIGATION UNDER CONSTRAINT: A SITUATIONIST ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON POVERTY RELIEF

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Abstract

This paper examines the ethics of helping the poor through the perspective of situationism in moral philosophy and moral psychology. Situationism emphasizes the role of contextual, social, institutional, and psychological factors in shaping moral judgment and action, challenging ethical theories that assume fixed moral rules or stable virtues. Contrary to this background, the paper argues that moral responsibility in relation to global poverty cannot be understood as universally fixed but must be interpreted in light of agents' capacities, institutional conditions, and the consequences of action. It critically engages both supporting and opposing arguments concerning poverty relief, emphasizing tensions between duties of assistance, individual rights, institutional effectiveness, and respect for autonomy. While the paper maintains that assisting the poor is morally significant, it argues that the strength and scope of such obligations are context-dependent rather than absolute. The paper ultimately defends an integrated context in which situationist insights are combined with normative ethical principles, offering a more realistic and practically responsive account of moral responsibility in addressing global poverty.

Keywords: moral responsibility, situationism, global poverty, ethical context-dependence, moral psychology, poverty relief.

Introduction

The persistence of extreme poverty in the midst of unprecedented global wealth remains one of the most disturbing moral contradictions of the contemporary world. That is the moral question of whether individuals and societies have a duty to help the poor is one of the most imperative and contested problems in present moral and political philosophy. Despite remarkable technological advancement, economic growth, and increasing global productivity, millions of people continue to live under conditions of severe deprivation without adequate access to food, clean water, shelter, healthcare, education, and other necessities required for a minimally decent human life. Recent reports from the World Bank indicate that nearly 700 million people still live in extreme poverty, while global poverty reduction has slowed considerably due to economic crises, armed conflicts, climate change, political instability, and

the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank, 2024). Poverty therefore remains not merely an economic concern but a pressing moral and political problem that raises fundamental questions about justice, responsibility, and human obligation in an interconnected world.

The moral significance of poverty has generated extensive debate within moral and political philosophy. One fundamental question concerns whether individuals and wealthy societies possess a moral obligation to assist those living in conditions of deprivation. If such obligations exist, further questions emerge concerning their nature, extent, and justification. Are obligations to help the poor grounded in charity, beneficence, justice, or human rights? Are they universal and unconditional, or do they depend upon social circumstances, institutional realities, and practical limitations? These questions have become increasingly important in contemporary considerations of global justice, particularly in light of widening economic inequality and persistent structural disadvantage.

Traditional ethical theories have offered influential but competing answers to these questions. Utilitarian philosophers such as Peter Singer argue that individuals are morally obligated to prevent suffering whenever they can do so without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance (Singer, 2009). From this perspective, geographical distance or national boundaries possess little moral relevance when compared to the urgency of human suffering. Deontological approaches, particularly those influenced by Kantian ethics, ground obligations of assistance in respect for persons as rational beings possessing intrinsic dignity (Kant, 1785/1996). Similarly, distributive justice theories such as John Rawls's difference principle maintain that social and economic institutions are morally legitimate only when they operate to the advantage of the least privileged members of society (Rawls, 1971). Thomas Pogge further argues that global poverty is not merely unfortunate but is actively sustained by unjust international economic and political arrangements that affluent societies help maintain (Pogge, 2008).

Although these approaches differ significantly, they often share an underlying assumption about moral agency: namely, that individual is capable of acting consistently on the basis of stable moral principles, rational deliberation, or enduring moral character. However, this assumption has increasingly been challenged by developments in moral psychology and situationist ethics. Practical studies in social psychology suggests that moral behavior is

frequently shaped by contextual and environmental factors such as time pressure, emotional condition, institutional setting, social expectations, and diffusion of responsibility rather than by fixed character traits alone (Darley & Batson, 1973; Doris, 2002). Additional studies in behavioral ethics and cognitive psychology similarly indicate that moral judgment and prosocial behavior are often influenced by unconscious biases, situational framing, and institutional environments (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011; Miller, 2018). These findings raise important philosophical concerns regarding the plausibility of ethical theories that rely heavily on stable dispositions or universally applicable moral duties.

It is within this context that situationism emerges as a significant perspective for rethinking moral responsibility toward the poor. Situationism maintains that moral action cannot adequately be explained solely through reference to fixed virtues, universal rules, or abstract principles, since human behavior is profoundly influenced by situational and structural conditions. Rather than viewing moral agents as consistently rational and morally stable actors, situationism emphasizes the extent to which moral conduct is shaped by psychological limitations, institutional arrangements, social pressures, and environmental circumstances (Doris, 2002). This does not imply that moral principles are meaningless or irrelevant; rather, it calls into question the assumption that moral principles alone reliably determine ethical behavior across different contexts.

This paper argues that situationism reveals an important limitation within traditional theories of moral obligation toward the poor. Many Universalist ethical approaches presuppose a degree of psychological consistency and practical moral agency that practical studies of human behavior increasingly challenge. Consequently, moral obligations concerning poverty relief cannot be understood adequately through abstract moral principles alone, but must also account for contextual realities, institutional constraints, and the situational conditions under which moral decisions are made. A situationist approach therefore offers a more psychologically realistic and context-sensitive basis for assessing moral responsibility in relation to global poverty.

The paper proceeds by first clarifying the concept of poverty and its moral significance before examining the central claims of situationism and situation ethics. It then critically analyzes major philosophical arguments both for and against helping the poor and finally evaluates the strengths and limitations of a situationist approach to moral responsibility in the

context of poverty relief. Through this analysis, the paper seeks to contribute to contemporary debates on global justice by demonstrating how empirical insights about human moral behavior can deepen philosophical discussions concerning ethical obligation and social responsibility.

Understanding the Concept of Poverty

Poverty is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be adequately captured by purely income-based or economic measures. Although it is often operationalized in terms of income thresholds or consumption levels, such approaches fail to capture its broader social, political, and moral dimensions. A philosophically adequate understanding of poverty must therefore extend beyond material deprivation to include capability deprivation, social exclusion, vulnerability, and the erosion of human dignity (Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2017).

From a conventional economic perspective, poverty is typically defined as the inability to secure sufficient financial resources to meet basic needs. A common distinction is drawn between absolute and relative poverty. Absolute poverty refers to severe deprivation in which individuals lack access to basic necessities such as adequate nutrition, clean water, shelter, and healthcare. Robert McNamara famously described this condition in terms of malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, and low life expectancy, representing conditions incompatible with a minimally decent human life (McNamara, 1973). Relative poverty, by contrast, is defined in relation to prevailing social standards within a given society. Individuals may meet basic survival needs yet remain excluded from meaningful participation in social, economic, and cultural life. This highlights inequality, marginalization, and reduced life opportunities rather than mere subsistence (Townsend, 1979).

Beyond these classifications, Amartya Sen's capability approach offers a more normatively robust framework. Poverty is understood here as deprivation of substantive freedoms to achieve valued functioning and ways of life (Sen, 1999). Income is significant only insofar as it expands real opportunities for education, healthcare, political participation, and social recognition. Present developments in capability theory further emphasize poverty as a failure of human flourishing rather than simply a lack of resources (Robeyns, 2017).

Importantly, poverty is not merely the result of individual misfortune or a form of natural bad luck but is often structurally produced and sustained. Global trade systems, political instability, corruption, and historical patterns of colonial exploitation contribute significantly to

persistent deprivation. Pogge argues that poverty is embedded within institutional arrangements that systematically disadvantage certain populations (Pogge, 2008). Hickel further argues that global inequality is actively reproduced through economic systems that benefit affluent societies while constraining the development of poorer regions (Hickel, 2020). In this sense, poverty constitutes a form of structural injustice, that which is an outcome of systemic arrangements rather than isolated individual actions (Young, 2011).

The moral significance of poverty lies in its systematic violation of fundamental human rights. Extreme poverty undermines access to rights such as life, health, education, security, and political participation, exposing individuals to chronic vulnerability and premature death (Pogge, 2008; World Bank, 2024). These deprivations are not morally neutral; they represent serious injustices requiring ethical explanation and response.

Understanding poverty in this multidimensional and morally charged sense is essential for evaluating moral responsibility toward the poor. If poverty were merely a matter of individual misfortune, moral responses might be limited to discretionary charity. However, if poverty is structurally produced and involves capability deprivation, then moral responsibility extends to questions of justice, institutional reform, and collective accountability. This expanded understanding of poverty provides the necessary foundation for examining whether and how moral agents ought to assist the poor, which is an inquiry that becomes especially significant when interpreted through a situationist principle.

Situationism and Situation Ethics

Situationism in moral philosophy and moral psychology challenges the traditional assumption that moral behavior is primarily explained by stable character traits or enduring virtues. Instead, situationists argue that moral action is significantly shaped by contextual and environmental factors such as social pressure, emotional states, time constraints, cognitive biases, and institutional structures (Doris, 2002; Harman, 1999). Developments in moral psychology and behavioral ethics have strengthened this view by demonstrating that even subtle situational cues can systematically influence moral judgment and prosocial behavior in ways that agents often fail to recognize (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011; Miller, 2018). Further current experimental and computational study further confirms that moral decision-making is

highly sensitive to framing effects, institutional context, and incentive structures (Xie, Hirst, & Xu, 2020; Emelin, 2020).

Philosophical considerations have also revisited the tension between situationism and virtue ethics, not by rejecting situationism outright but by refining its implications for moral agency. For instance, while character traits may not be fully “robust,” they still interact dynamically with situational environments in shaping moral behavior (Bock, 2025; de Bruin, Zaal, & Jeurissen, 2023). This suggests that moral agency is better understood as context-sensitive rather than character-determined.

The philosophical roots of situationism lie in both empirical psychology and ethical theory. John Doris (2002) famously challenges the Aristotelian assumption that virtues such as honesty, courage, and generosity are stable dispositions that reliably guide behavior across contexts. Aristotle’s virtue ethics assumes a relatively unified moral character that expresses itself consistently across situations (Aristotle, trans. 2000). Situationist, however, argue that empirical findings undermine this assumption by showing that moral behavior often varies significantly across contexts despite stable moral beliefs or self-conceptions.

Classic experimental studies remain influential in this discussion. The Good Samaritan experiment by Darley and Batson (1973) demonstrated that even seminary students were significantly less likely to help a distressed individual when placed under time pressure. Similarly, Isen and Levin (1972) found that individuals in positive emotional states were more likely to engage in helping behavior than those in neutral moods. While these studies remain foundational, recent study in behavioral ethics has expanded their implications by showing that organizational environments, incentive systems, and cognitive overload significantly shape moral behavior in predictable ways (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011; Miller, 2018).

Gilbert Harman (1999) further develops the philosophical critique by appealing to the “fundamental attribution error,” the psychological tendency to overemphasize internal traits while underestimating situational influences in explaining behavior. Contemporary extensions of this critique suggest that moral judgment itself is often shaped by unconscious cognitive processes and contextual framing effects, challenging the assumption of fully transparent moral agency (Miller, 2018; Xie, 2020).

Situation ethics, most prominently developed by Joseph Fletcher (1966), provides a normative framework that complements these empirical insights. Fletcher rejects both rigid

moral absolutism and unrestricted relativism, proposing instead that moral judgment should be guided by agape, which is self-giving love aimed at human flourishing. Moral rules, on this view, function as flexible guides rather than absolute commands, and must be evaluated in light of concrete circumstances. In relation to poverty, this implies that moral obligations cannot be derived purely from abstract duties but must consider contextual factors such as resource availability, institutional effectiveness, and potential unintended consequences (Fletcher, 1966). Further current ethical considerations have extended this contextual sensitivity into applied domains such as global justice, where scholars argue that moral responsibility is distributed across individuals and institutions in ways that depend heavily on structural conditions (Risse, 2012; Hickel, 2020). This strengthens the situationist intuition that moral responsibility cannot be understood independently of systemic constraints.

Situationism also raises important questions concerning moral responsibility, praise, and blame. If moral behavior is significantly shaped by factors outside an agent's control, then traditional notions of moral credit and culpability become more complex. Doris (2002) argues that conventional practices of moral evaluation may overstate the explanatory role of character. However, it suggests a revision rather than elimination of moral responsibility that agents can still be held accountable, but only within a framework that acknowledges situational constraint, cognitive limitation, and institutional context (Buss, 2025; Piovarchy, 2020).

Applied to the ethics of helping the poor, situationism and situation ethics jointly suggest that moral obligations are not fixed or universally uniform. Whether an agent is required to assist the poor depends on situational conditions such as resources, institutional capacity, and expected effectiveness of intervention. Contemporary global ethics literature reinforces this view by emphasizing that effective poverty relief depends heavily on structural context and institutional design (World Bank, 2024; Hickel, 2020). Furthermore, situation-sensitive ethics highlights the consequences of moral action. Assistance to the poor is morally justified when it effectively reduces suffering, but may become morally ambiguous when it generates dependency, inefficiency, or unintended harm (Deaton, 2013). According to World Bank, development in economics similarly emphasizes that the effectiveness of aid depends strongly on institutional and contextual factors rather than moral intention alone (World Bank, 2024).

In the long run, situationism provides a psychologically informed basis for understanding moral action, while situation ethics offers a normative orientation that preserves

moral evaluation without relying on rigid universalism. Together, they provide a more realistic account of moral agency in complex environments such as global poverty, where structural constraints and situational variability significantly shape moral possibilities.

Moral Problems in Helping the Poor

Helping the poor raises a range of moral problems that resist simplistic ethical prescriptions. While the suffering associated with poverty generates a strong intuitive demand for assistance, profound analysis reveals persistent tensions concerning responsibility, effectiveness, autonomy, and unintended consequences. These tensions suggest that moral responses to poverty cannot be adequately captured by universal rules alone, but must instead be sensitive to the complexity of concrete situations.

A central difficulty concerns the distribution of moral responsibility. If poverty is partly produced by structural injustice and global economic inequality, then it becomes unclear whether responsibility should be located primarily at the level of individuals, states, or global institutions (Pogge, 2008; Young, 2011). Traditional ethical theories attempt to resolve this ambiguity in different ways. Utilitarianism holds that agents are morally required to prevent suffering whenever they can do so without comparable moral sacrifice (Singer, 2009). Kantian ethics grounds moral obligation in respect for persons as ends in themselves, thereby generating duties of assistance under conditions of need (Kant, 1785/1996). By contrast, contemporary theories of global justice emphasize the institutional production of poverty, arguing that affluent societies bear responsibility because global economic structures systematically disadvantage poorer populations (Risse, 2012; Hickel, 2020).

Finding in political philosophy further complicates this picture by showing that responsibility in global poverty contexts is distributed across overlapping institutional and causal networks rather than traceable to discrete agents alone (Risse, 2012). This challenges the assumption that moral obligation can be cleanly assigned in universal terms. Situationism intensifies this difficulty by emphasizing that even when moral obligations are acknowledged in principle, an agent's capacity to act is shaped by situational constraints such as institutional structure, resource availability, and social environment. Practical research in moral psychology supports this view, showing that perceived responsibility and willingness to help are highly sensitive to contextual framing and institutional conditions (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011;

Miller, 2018). Moral responsibility, therefore, cannot be understood independently of the situations that enable or restrict action.

A further problem concerns the effectiveness of assistance. Helping the poor is morally justified only insofar as it produces beneficial outcomes without generating negative unintended harm. While aid can reduce suffering and save lives, poorly designed interventions may weaken local economies, foster dependency, or reinforce corrupt governance structures (Deaton, 2013). World Bank reinforces this concern by showing that the success of poverty alleviation strategies depends heavily on institutional context, governance quality, and economic structure (World Bank, 2024). This makes it difficult to maintain that assistance is always morally good in an unqualified sense.

Situationism aligns closely with this insight by shifting moral evaluation away from abstract obligation toward contextual assessment of consequences. On this view, moral judgment must consider whether a particular intervention is likely to succeed within a specific institutional and social environment rather than assuming that assistance is inherently required or beneficial. Similarly, in moral psychology and applied ethics emphasizes that moral decision-making often involves context-sensitive reasoning rather than strict rule application, especially in complex domains such as global poverty (Greene, 2019; Miller, 2018).

Assistance becomes morally problematic when it undermines the agency of those it intends to help. Amartya Sen's capability approach argues that justice requires not merely the distribution of resources but the expansion of substantive freedoms that enable individuals to determine the course of their own lives (Sen, 1999). In a similar vein, Martha Nussbaum maintains that human dignity is closely tied to the human capacity for practical reason, that is, the ability to reflect, deliberate, evaluate alternatives, and make meaningful choices concerning one's conception of a worthwhile life (Nussbaum, 2011). Practical reason is central to autonomy because it enables persons to function as self-governing agents rather than passive recipients of external control. Assistance that disregards this capacity actually risks becoming paternalistic, substituting the judgment of donors or institutions for the decision-making agency of the poor themselves. Developments in capability theory further emphasize that certain forms of aid may unintentionally reinforce structures of dependency instead of expanding genuine freedom and participatory agency (Robeyns, 2017). Moral evaluation must therefore consider not only whether aid alleviates suffering, but also whether it preserves and strengthens the

recipient's ability to exercise practical judgment and participate meaningfully in shaping their own social and material conditions from situations' understanding.

From a situationist viewpoint, this implies that moral evaluation must extend beyond intention or immediate relief to include the broader contextual effects of assistance on human agency. Whether aid is morally justified depends not only on its capacity to reduce suffering but also on whether it enhances or constrains the long-term capabilities of recipients. Moral responsibility, therefore, becomes fundamentally context-dependent rather than rule-governed.

Helping the poor also involve or generate persistent conflicts between competing moral obligations. Individuals and states frequently face trade-offs between local and global responsibilities, immediate relief and long-term development, or individual rights and collective welfare. Governments, for instance, may struggle to allocate limited resources between domestic poverty reduction and international humanitarian assistance (Rawls, 1971; Singer, 2009). Contemporary global justice theory emphasizes that such tensions are not accidental but structurally embedded within global economic and political systems (Risse, 2012; Hickel, 2020).

Situationism offers a way of understanding these conflicts by emphasizing practical reasoning under constraint rather than strict adherence to universal principles. Moral decisions in such contexts are shaped by situational pressures, institutional limitations, and available resources. This view shows that individuals often resolve moral dilemmas through heuristic and context-sensitive reasoning rather than rule-based deliberation alone (Miller, 2018; Greene, 2019).

Finally, experimental research in moral psychology highlights the variability of moral behavior across situations. Even individuals with strong moral commitments may fail to act due to time pressure, cognitive overload, emotional state, or social influence (Darley & Batson, 1973; Isen & Levin, 1972). More recent studies confirm that prosocial behavior is highly sensitive to environmental cues, framing effects, and institutional design (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011; Miller, 2018). These findings challenge ethical theories that assume stable moral agency and consistent moral performance across contexts. Situationism incorporates this empirical insight by suggesting that moral evaluation must account for the interaction between internal dispositions and external conditions. Moral failure, on this view, cannot always be reduced to character deficiency but may reflect situational constraint.

Arguments for Helping the Poor

The moral case for assisting the poor has been defended across several philosophical traditions; each converging on the claim that extreme poverty generates serious moral obligations rather than mere charitable preferences. Despite differences in grounding, these perspectives collectively challenge the view that aiding the poor is optional, instead framing it as a requirement of morality, justice, or human dignity. From a utilitarian perspective, the most influential argument is that moral action should aim at maximizing overall well-being while minimizing suffering. Peter Singer (2009) argues that if individuals can prevent significant suffering or death without sacrificing something of comparable moral importance, they are morally required to do so. The force of this argument lies in its rejection of moral distance: geographical separation, social unfamiliarity, or lack of personal connection does not weaken moral responsibility when preventable suffering is at stake. What matters is the capacity to reduce suffering, not relational proximity.

This line of reasoning, which can be traced back to classical utilitarians such as Henry Sidgwick (1907), has gained renewed relevance in contemporary discussions of global ethics and effective altruism, where the emphasis is placed on the real-world impact of moral action rather than intention alone (Singer, 2009; MacAskill, 2015). Greene further reinforces this consequentialist intuition by stressing that moral responsibility tracks preventable harm under conditions of feasible intervention rather than ideal moral perfection (Greene, 2019).

Deontological ethics offers a different but complementary justification. Kant's moral philosophy, particularly categorical imperative grounds obligation in respect for persons as ends in themselves, which prohibits treating individuals merely as means to external purposes (Kant, 1785/1996). Extreme poverty undermines the conditions necessary for autonomous rational agency, thereby generating duties to assist those whose basic capacities for dignity and choice are threatened. From this standpoint, failing to assist the poor is not merely unfortunate but morally impermissible insofar as it allows conditions that violate human dignity to persist. Kantian theorists extend this argument beyond interpersonal ethics into global moral responsibility. Onora O'Neill (1996), for example, argues that obligations of justice require institutions and individuals alike to avoid foreseeable harm and to uphold basic conditions of human agency, even across national boundaries. Kantian-inspired global ethics continues to

emphasize that moral respect for persons necessarily generates transnational duties when basic rights are at stake (O'Neill, 2016).

Rights-based approaches strengthen this deontological framework by reframing poverty as a violation of fundamental human rights. Thomas Pogge (2008) argues that global poverty is not merely a natural misfortune but is sustained by unjust institutional arrangements that advantage wealthy societies while predictably harming the poor. On this view, affluent states bear negative duties not to participate in or uphold systems that perpetuate deprivation. Assistance to the poor therefore becomes a matter of rectifying structural injustice rather than voluntary charity. Recent work in global justice theory reinforces this structural diagnosis by showing how economic institutions systematically reproduce inequality through trade regimes, debt systems, and governance asymmetries (Risse, 2012; Hickel, 2020).

Virtue ethics provides yet another dimension by focusing on the moral character of agents rather than rules or consequences alone. Aristotle's account of virtue emphasizes the cultivation of dispositions such as compassion, generosity, and practical wisdom as essential to human prosperity (Aristotle, trans. 2000). Rosalind Hursthouse (1999) argues that helping those in need is an expression of virtuous character insofar as it reflects sensitivity to human suffering and appropriate moral perception. From this perspective, assisting the poor is not only about outcomes but about becoming the kind of person who responds rightly to the vulnerability of others.

Justice-based theories further extend the moral argument by focusing on fairness and structural equality. John Rawls (1971) argues that social and economic inequalities are justified only when they benefit the least advantaged members of society. This principle places the condition of the poor at the center of moral and political evaluation. Similarly, Iris Marion Young (2011) shifts attention from individual responsibility to structural injustice, arguing that poverty is often produced by institutional processes and collective social arrangements rather than isolated wrongdoing. Political philosophy continues this line of thought by emphasizing that global poverty is sustained through systemic relations of power that demand institutional correction rather than mere charitable response (Risse, 2012).

Considered together, these philosophical traditions converge on a shared conclusion: extreme poverty generates serious moral reasons for action that cannot be reduced to optional generosity. Whether grounded in consequences, duties, rights, virtues, or justice, the moral

imperative to assist the poor emerges as a stable feature of ethical reflection. However, as later sections will suggest, the way these obligations are interpreted and acted upon remains deeply sensitive to situational constraints, institutional conditions, and practical feasibility.

Arguments against Helping the Poor

Although many philosophical traditions defend strong moral obligations to assist the poor, a significant body of thought challenges the coherence, desirability, and universality of such obligations. These critiques do not necessarily deny that poverty is morally troubling; rather, they question whether assisting the poor is always morally required, always effective, or always justified under conditions of justice, autonomy, and institutional complexity.

A central objection emerges from libertarian political philosophy, which prioritizes individual rights, especially property rights, over redistributive claims. Robert Nozick (1974) argues that individuals are entitled to holdings acquired through legitimate means, and that compulsory redistribution violates this entitlement by treating individuals as instruments for others' welfare. From this perspective, state-enforced assistance to the poor is morally problematic because it undermines personal liberty and the moral integrity of ownership. Libertarian arguments continue to stress that justice is fundamentally about non-interference rather than patterned redistribution, thereby placing strict limits on the moral justification of compulsory poverty relief.

A second line of criticism focuses on the empirical and institutional consequences of aid. Development economists such as Deaton (2013) argue that large-scale foreign aid can weaken local governance structures, distort economic incentives, and create long-term dependency. Instead of resolving poverty, poorly structured aid may entrench it by undermining domestic productivity and encouraging reliance on external support. This concern is reinforced in contemporary development research, which increasingly emphasizes that aid effectiveness depends heavily on institutional quality, governance capacity, and context-specific design rather than moral intention alone (World Bank, 2024). From this perspective, moral enthusiasm for helping the poor must be tempered by empirical caution about unintended consequences.

Related to this is the problem of moral hazard and dependency. Public choice theorists such as James M. Buchanan (1985) argue that welfare systems and redistributive mechanisms may unintentionally discourage responsibility and self-sufficiency when incentives are poorly

aligned. He further contends that redistributive policies are often affected by bureaucratic inefficiency, political self-interest, and rent-seeking, where state actors pursue institutional or personal advantages rather than the genuine welfare of the poor. The concern is not merely economic but moral: when assistance is guaranteed regardless of behavior, it may weaken the development of agency and responsibility among recipients. Behavioral study in economics and psychology similarly suggests that incentive structures significantly shape long-term decision-making and can influence dependency patterns in welfare systems (Miller, 2018).

Another important critique concerns autonomy and paternalism. Even when aid is motivated by concern for the poor, it may undermine the agency of recipients by imposing external judgments about what counts as a good or valuable life. Martha Nussbaum (2011) and capability theorists acknowledge this risk, emphasizing that development must expand, rather than restrict, the substantive freedoms of individuals. However, critics argue that many development interventions fail this standard by substituting external planning for local autonomy. Global ethics reinforce this concern, warning that well-intentioned assistance can reproduce asymmetries of power that limit self-determination rather than enhance it (Robeyns, 2017).

A further challenge arises from the problem of demandingness in moral theory. Bernard Williams (1973) argues that moral theories that impose extensive obligations risk alienating agents from their personal projects, commitments, and identity. Applied to global poverty, this suggests that while helping the poor may be morally admirable, it cannot be assumed to generate unlimited or universal obligations for all agents in all circumstances. Moral requirements must be sensitive to human limitations, practical constraints, and the structure of lived experience.

Situationism reinforces several of these critiques by emphasizing that moral action is deeply context-dependent. Moral behavior is shaped by situational constraints such as institutional structure, cognitive load, and available resources (Doris, 2002). From this perspective, it is unreasonable to assume that agents will consistently fulfill strong moral obligations to assist the poor across all contexts. Whether assistance is appropriate depends on the agent's capacity, the likely effectiveness of intervention, and the broader situational environment in which moral decisions are made.

Considered together, these objections do not eliminate the moral importance of poverty but complicate the assumption that helping the poor is always a straightforward moral duty.

Instead, they suggest that moral responsibility in relation to poverty is conditional, constrained, and highly sensitive to institutional and situational realities.

A Situationist Analysis of Helping the Poor

Situationism in moral philosophy and moral psychology challenges the assumption that moral behavior is primarily governed by stable character traits or universal moral rules. Instead, it argues that moral judgment and action are significantly shaped by contextual, institutional, and psychological conditions (Doris, 2002; Harman, 1999). When applied to the ethics of helping the poor, situationism shifts attention away from abstract obligations toward the concrete conditions under which moral action becomes possible, effective, or even desirable.

From this perspective, moral duties are not fixed entities that apply uniformly across contexts but are sensitive to situational variability. Although dominant ethical theories such as utilitarianism, Kantian deontology, and theories of global justice tend to present assistance to the poor as a strong moral requirement (Singer, 2009; Kant, 1785/1996; Pogge, 2008), situationism insists that such obligations must be filtered through practical conditions of agency, capacity, and institutional environment. The ability of an agent to assist meaningfully is not simply a matter of moral will but is shaped by access to resources, knowledge, and effective channels of intervention. In many cases, what appears to be a moral failure may in fact reflect structural or situational limitation rather than ethical deficiency.

Equally important is the recognition that the moral value of assistance depends on its contextual effectiveness. Aid delivered without regard to institutional or economic conditions may fail to achieve its intended goals or may even produce harmful consequences. Development research has increasingly emphasized that the success of poverty alleviation efforts is contingent on governance structures, local institutional stability, and economic absorptive capacity (Deaton, 2013; World Bank, 2024). This reinforces the situationist claim that moral evaluation must include empirical sensitivity to context rather than relying solely on abstract principles of beneficence or justice.

Furthermore, assistance to the poor must be evaluated in light of its broader social consequences, including the possibility of dependency, market distortion, or weakened institutional accountability. Critics such as Hardin (1968) and Buchanan (1985) highlight how well-intentioned interventions can generate systemic instability when incentive structures are

ignored. For example, continuous foreign food aid may undermine local agricultural markets by making it difficult for local farmers to compete with subsidized imports, while poorly monitored welfare systems can encourage bureaucratic inefficiency and long-term dependency. Even where moral motivation is present, outcomes may diverge significantly from expectations if situational dynamics are misunderstood. Situationism thus reframes moral responsibility as involving not only intention but also practical foresight and contextual awareness.

Classic studies demonstrate that helping behavior is highly sensitive to situational variables such as time pressure, emotional state, and environmental cues rather than stable moral disposition alone (Darley & Batson, 1973; Isen & Levin, 1972). These studies show that prosocial behavior is shaped by cognitive load, framing effects, and institutional design, suggesting that moral action is deeply embedded in environmental structures (Miller, 2018; Greene, 2019). Applied to global poverty, this implies that moral obligation cannot be understood independently of the psychological and institutional conditions under which agents operate.

A situationist framework therefore evaluates moral action in terms of what agents can reasonably be expected to do given their capacities, the likely consequences of intervention, and the institutional contexts in which they act. This does not eliminate moral responsibility but reconfigures it as context-sensitive practical judgment rather than rigid rule-following. Moral assessment becomes a matter of whether agents respond intelligently and responsibly to the constraints and opportunities of their situation, rather than whether they comply with universalized moral requirements.

Several situational variables further shape the ethics of poverty relief. Temporal constraints influence whether immediate relief or long-term structural intervention is more appropriate. Institutional conditions determine whether aid is likely to be effective or captured by corruption. Psychological factors such as empathy, fatigue, and attention affect the likelihood of moral action. Cultural norms shape how assistance is perceived and whether it is received as respectful or intrusive (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). Together, these factors illustrate that moral decision-making in poverty contexts is inherently embedded in complex situational environments.

A common objection to situationism is that it undermines moral responsibility by attributing behavior too heavily to external conditions. However, situationists do not deny

responsibility; rather, they reconceive it in terms of practical wisdom and contextual responsiveness. An agent may still be morally praiseworthy when they engage in careful, informed, and context-sensitive deliberation, even if outcomes are imperfect. Conversely, moral failure may consist not in lack of virtue but in negligence regarding relevant situational constraints. Moral responsibility, on this view, is preserved through attentiveness to context rather than adherence to rigid principles.

In the end, a situationist account of helping the poor suggests that moral obligation is neither absolute nor absent but conditional upon the interaction between agent capacity, institutional context, and expected consequences. It provides a mediating position between rigid moral universalism and relativism by grounding moral judgment in empirical realities while retaining evaluative standards. In this sense, situationism offers not a rejection of moral responsibility but a refinement of how such responsibility should be understood in complex global contexts marked by poverty and inequality.

Critical Assessment of Situationism

Situationism offers a powerful corrective to overly idealized accounts of moral agency by emphasizing the decisive role of contextual, psychological, and institutional factors in shaping moral judgment and behavior (Doris, 2002; Harman, 1999). In the context of poverty ethics, it provides a more realistic insight into why individuals and institutions often fail to act on their moral commitments despite recognizing the urgency of global deprivation. However, while its explanatory power is significant, its normative implications remain deeply contested, especially regarding moral responsibility, ethical guidance, and the stability of moral evaluation.

One of the central strengths of situationism lies in its strong empirical foundation. Contemporary moral psychology studies show that moral behavior is not primarily governed by or shape stable character traits but is highly sensitive to situational variables such as cognitive load, emotional framing, institutional environment, and decision architecture (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011; Cushman, 2019). Classic experiments, such as the Good Samaritan study, already demonstrated that seemingly minor contextual factors like time pressure can significantly override moral intentions (Darley & Batson, 1973). This shows that prosocial behavior is deeply shaped by environmental design and cognitive limitations rather

than purely stable moral dispositions (Miller, 2018; Greene, 2019). Applied to global poverty, this suggests that moral failure to assist the poor cannot always be straightforwardly interpreted as lack of moral commitment; it may also reflect structural constraints and situational overload.

Situationism also contributes to moral theory by grounding ethical reflection in lived human conditions rather than abstract idealizations. It challenges the assumption that moral agents consistently operate under conditions of full rationality, information, and freedom. Instead, it highlights the extent to which moral decision-making is embedded in institutional, psychological, and social environments. This makes it particularly relevant for poverty ethics, where decisions about aid are shaped by governance structures, economic systems, and informational asymmetries. Global justice theorists increasingly acknowledge this embeddedness, emphasizing that moral responsibility must be evaluated in relation to real institutional contexts rather than idealized agents (O'Neill, 2016; Risse, 2012).

However, the same empirical strength that supports situationism also generates significant normative challenges. If moral behavior is heavily influenced by factors beyond the agent's control, then traditional accounts of moral responsibility, particularly praise and blame, become less stable. This raises a fundamental philosophical tension: whether moral evaluation can remain meaningful if actions are largely shaped by external conditions (Doris, 2002; Sverdlik, 2018). In the context of poverty relief, this implies difficulty in determining whether failure to assist the poor should be attributed to moral negligence or to situational constraints such as limited resources, institutional barriers, or psychological fatigue.

A further concern is the risk of normative indeterminacy. Because situationism emphasizes variability across contexts, it may generate unstable moral guidance. Similar agents in similar situations may receive different moral evaluations depending on subtle contextual differences, raising concerns about consistency in moral reasoning. Recent critiques in moral psychology and ethics suggest that without some stable normative framework, situation-sensitive ethics may struggle to provide reliable action-guidance in complex global issues such as poverty alleviation (Cushman, 2019; Miller, 2018).

Moreover, situationism is less equipped to address structural injustice at the level required for global poverty analysis. Poverty is not merely the result of individual inaction but is deeply embedded in global economic and political systems that systematically reproduce inequality (Pogge, 2008; Sen, 1999). While situationism effectively explains individual

variation in moral response, it offers limited resources for diagnosing and transforming these large-scale institutional structures. Global justice theory therefore insists that structural explanations must complement psychological accounts if poverty is to be adequately understood and addressed (Risse, 2012; World Bank, 2024).

Another limitation lies in the epistemic demands placed on moral agents. Situationism assumes that agents can accurately interpret situational variables and adjust moral judgment accordingly. However, recent work in behavioral ethics suggests that individuals frequently suffer from “ethical blind spots,” where cognitive biases and limited information distort moral perception (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011). This means that situational sensitivity itself may be unreliable unless supported by institutional safeguards or normative principles that guide interpretation.

Despite these limitations, situationism remains philosophically valuable because it forces moral theory to confront the gap between ideal moral expectations and actual human behavior. It improves ethical reflection by integrating empirical psychology with normative analysis and by highlighting the importance of context, constraint, and cognitive limitation in moral life. However, its most defensible role is not as a standalone moral theory but as a complementary framework that must be integrated with wider ethical resources.

Finally, a defensible approach to poverty ethics must combine the empirical realism of situationism with the normative stability of theories such as deontology, virtue ethics, and global justice. While situationism explains how moral agents actually behave under constraints, these additional frameworks are necessary to determine how they ought to act. In this sense, situationism does not replace traditional moral theory but refines it, ensuring that moral judgment remains both humanly realistic and normatively meaningful.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the ethics of helping the poor through a situationist framework, arguing that moral responsibility in global poverty cannot be fully captured by traditional ethical theories that rely on fixed duties, rights, or stable virtues. While utilitarian, deontological, virtue-ethical, and justice-based approaches provide strong normative reasons for aiding the poor, they often assume idealized moral agency that overlooks how real moral decisions are shaped by contextual, institutional, and psychological conditions. Situationism

contributes a corrective by showing that moral action is significantly influenced by situational factors such as cognitive limitations, institutional structures, resource availability, and environmental pressures, thereby reframing moral responsibility as context-sensitive practical judgment rather than universal obligation. At the same time, the analysis has shown that situationism, while powerful in explaining variability in moral behavior, cannot independently ground a complete normative ethics, since it risks weakening stable standards of moral evaluation and guidance if left unaccompanied by broader moral principles. The paper therefore defends a balanced position in which situationist insights are integrated with normative frameworks of justice, human dignity, and moral accountability, allowing for an approach to poverty ethics that is both empirically realistic and normatively robust, and ultimately better suited to addressing the complex moral demands of global poverty.

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