

Philosophers and the Poor

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Abstract: This is a programmatic paper, calling for the renewal and modernisation of the therapeutic approach to philosophy found in Epicureans, Stoics, and Skeptics; and, in particular, for an application of the therapeutic approach to the life of poverty. The general assumption behind a therapeutic approach to philosophy is that it is possible for someone to be exposed to philosophical work which leads her to an improved understanding of herself and her situation, and for her life to be improved by this understanding. After offering a sketch of how, given the current nature of academic philosophy, such work will be carried out and disseminated, I suggest three areas in which philosophical discourse could have a therapeutic affect on the poor.

Keywords: poverty; philosophy; therapeutic philosophy; academic philosophy; academic communities; self-understanding.

The African-American essayist James Baldwin once wrote,

The most difficult (and most rewarding) thing in my life has been the fact that I was born a Negro and was forced, therefore, to effect some kind of truce with this reality. (Truce, by the way, is the best one can hope for.)¹

Baldwin's notion of a 'truce with one's reality', understood as a matter of coming to a reconciliation with a feature of oneself that is a source of hardship and pain, is the topic of this paper. The feature that I am concerned with is not, as it was for Baldwin, race, but rather poverty.

The conception of poverty with which I will be working is not driven by any particular theory of poverty. It is the following: poverty is a state in which one's economic deprivation has some of a wide range of harmful consequences, including malnutrition, unsanitary living conditions, low access to healthcare and education, low employability, a higher incidence for alcoholism and drug abuse, a lack of leisure time, severely reduced aspirations, and a deepened overall vulnerability to accident, illness, or calamity.² Any list such as this must be left open-ended, as it is being continually extended by sociological,

economic, and psychological research. Note that while I take some form of economic deprivation to be necessary for poverty, it is not sufficient for it; an employed, highly literate person may decide to give away most of her savings and salary, but that does not thereby place her among the poor.³ Those in poverty suffer in virtue of being economically deprived, but this is only the beginning — and the least informative part — of the story. We are and should be concerned with the poor not because of their economic deprivation *per se*, but because of the various ways in which economic deprivation has negatively affected their lives. Economic deprivation is the source of suffering in an enormous and complicated range of ways; its harmful consequences vary depending upon climate, surroundings, political context, and other factors. Subsequently, when I speak of ‘the poor’ in this paper, I am in no way making reference to a group of people who are all suffering in the same way.

The driving assumption behind this paper is that someone who suffers in virtue of economic deprivation is likely to need, in Baldwin’s words, ‘to effect some kind of truce with’ her poverty. In the light of this, philosophical work on poverty should, I will be suggesting, expand in a new direction. Philosophers should be thinking about issues faced by the poor in the understanding of their own lives, with the aim of offering up new ways for them to conceive of their situation, and for their lives to be improved in the process. My aim is to make plausible the thought that philosophical work might aide the poor in coming to ‘some kind of truce’ with their reality, and to tentatively suggest some areas in which this might be done.

1. The Therapeutic View of Philosophy

The precedents for the kind of work I will be exploring and encouraging are ancient, and found most explicitly in the Epicureans, the Sceptics, and the Stoics, proponents of what is sometimes called a ‘medical’ or ‘therapeutic’ view of philosophy. The following are two statements of this view, the first by the Stoic founder Chrysippus, and the second by the Stoic spokesman Cicero.

It is not true that there exists an art that we call medicine, concerned with the diseased body, but no corresponding art concerned with the diseased soul. Nor is it true that the latter is inferior to the former, in its theoretical grasp and therapeutic treatment of individual cases.

There is, I assure you, a medical art for the soul. It is philosophy, whose aid need not be sought, as in bodily diseases, from outside ourselves. We must endeavor with all our resources and all our strength to become capable of doctoring ourselves.⁴

I believe that work on the meaning and significance of being poor, on issues faced by the poor in the understanding of their own lives, can have a kind of therapeutic effect, and this paper is an attempt to fill out this suggestion.⁵

In calling for therapeutic philosophical work on poverty, I am not critiquing any other kind of philosophical work on the poor. In other words, while I am in agreement with the Epicurean attitude by which philosophical work is approached with an eye to the therapeutic effect that it can have those who are exposed to it, I am not in agreement with Epicurus' own *exclusive* attitude towards such an approach:

Empty is that philosopher's argument by which no human suffering is therapeutically treated. For just as there is no use in a medical art that does not cast out the sicknesses of bodies, so too there is no use in philosophy, if it does not throw out suffering from the soul.⁶

Epicurus' exclusivity — his endorsement of only therapeutically-useful philosophy — is unwarranted. Other kinds of philosophical work, whether on the topic of poverty or on other topics, may be important, worthwhile, and useful in non-therapeutic ways.

A second area in which I will not be following the Ancients is in my endorsement of any particular aim of therapeutic philosophical work. The Sceptics, the Stoics and the Epicureans envisioned a fairly particular trajectory by which exposure to their work would bring about an improvement in someone's life. One aim of that trajectory was a kind of imperturbability,⁷ which one achieved by the understanding of one's inability to achieve knowledge (Sceptics), by the proper grasp of what is of value in the world (Stoics), or by whatever means necessary (Epicureans).⁸ While it is true that the aim of philosophy is a kind of understanding, I will be assuming that there is a range of ways in which philosophy can improve our understanding, and an enormous number of ways in which understanding can improve our lives. Imperturbability may, indeed, be one of the goods that results from exposure to philosophy, but I will not assume that it is the only one.

While I am taking my cue from the Ancient view of the potential therapeutic value of philosophical work, I will have nothing more to

say about the Ancients here. The therapeutic possibilities of philosophy need to be situated within the current academic structure of philosophy. This will be the task of the next two sections. In the fourth section of the paper, I will introduce three potential areas in which philosophical work might affect, for the better, how those in poverty understand themselves.

Before proceeding I wish to respond to a possible objection to my advocacy of therapeutic philosophical work on poverty. A call for this kind of philosophical work, it might be claimed, is out of place. Poverty must be *eradicated*, not come to terms with, and philosophers should be *only* engaged in the kind of work that is aimed towards bringing poverty to its end. I no way wish to discourage philosophical work that is aimed at reducing, alleviating, or eradicating poverty. Poverty *is* something to be fought, and philosophy can, I believe, play a role in this fight.⁹ However, I believe that it is short-sighted to advocate that philosophers contribute to fighting poverty without exploring the therapeutic influence that philosophical work may have on the poor. Even if poverty is something that can be eradicated — and there are ‘relative’ conceptions of poverty according to which it is conceptually impossible to eliminate it — a world in which there is no poverty will not be with us in any near future. In the meantime, there are generations of poor whose lives, I suggest, may be improved by coming to have different conceptions of themselves and their situation.

2. Academic Philosophy and the Poor

The therapeutic view of philosophy rests on the following thought:

It is possible for an individual to be exposed to philosophical work which leads her to an improved understanding of herself and her situation, and for her life to be improved by this understanding.

This commitment raises two questions which I will address in this section and the next. First, how is it that the poor are exposed to philosophical work, and secondly, how can such exposure improve their lives?

It is important to recognise, in thinking about the nature of philosophy and its therapeutic possibilities, that the present manifestation of the tradition of philosophical thought prominently includes the pro-

fessionals and advanced students who make up the community of academic philosophers. This is not to deny that a great deal of philosophical work and thought is carried out by those who do not do it either professionally or in an academic community. Nor is it to deny that there are persons who do not belong to an academic community who deserve — in the richest sense possible — to be called ‘philosophers’.¹⁰ Nevertheless, there is a large, international group of persons who earn our livelihood and who make our careers out of, continuing the philosophical tradition, and who do so as members of academic communities. It is of the members of this community whom I am speaking in this paper, and it is largely, I suspect, members of this community who will be reading these words.

One of the defining features of academic communities is that they carry out controlled *internal* dialogues; an academic community is a group of professionals talking *to each other*. Philosophy is not unique in this regard: like the members of many other academic disciplines, we — *as* professional philosophers — belong first and foremost to our academic community. Philosophical work is, by and large, inward-looking; the academic philosopher writes to be read by his peers, and his work is constructed to make a contribution to the conversation that his peers are having.¹¹ While I know of no empirical work that establishes this fact about the philosophical community, its plausibility will be evident to most philosophers who reflect upon their published work and that of their peers. In this respect, the philosophical community differs fundamentally from, say, literary and artistic communities, the members of which create work primarily for an audience wider than that of their peers. While the painter or composer may care a great deal what her peers think of her work, she is not creating fundamentally for her peers. The opposite is true of the greater part of philosophical creativity.

This is not to say that there is not a significant amount of writing on or from academic communities that is targeted at a wider, non-specialist public. On the contrary, there is a great deal — especially in the areas of science and history, but more and more in philosophy — written for public consumption. However, much of this latter work is written not by academic researchers, but by observers of the academic scene — specialist journalists, for example — and the vast majority of such work derives its content from previously published work from within the appropriate academic community. In contrast to artistic fields, there is almost no original philosophical work which is not presented first to a philosophical audience, and the vast

majority of the work shared within a community is never re-presented to a wider audience.

This is how it should be, for at least two reasons. First, in writing for her peers, the work of a philosopher gets an initial vetting by those who are most qualified to do so — specialists in her own field. If work is going to have a wider impact or hearing, it is important that it first gets a hearing among the specialist community. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the existence of an intra-focused, specialist community can make *theoretical progress* in a way that a more outward-focused community could not. In scientific communities this progress has tangible results, as scientists correct and build upon each others' findings. In the philosophical community, this progress will be conceptual or discursive, as the members push each other to explore new conceptual connections, reasons, and ways of expression. In both cases, such progress would be seriously hindered if academics had to spend a significant amount of their time sharing results with a wider audience. The public sharing of academic work must not be undertaken at the expense of intra-focused work and the promise it has. In sum, it is no doubt possible to do what we call philosophy outside of a community, but to do so comes at the cost of having one's work vetted and of the possibility of contributing to a conversation that will make headway. There is truth to the image of the vernacular-speaking, inward-looking academic community; more importantly, though, these much-maligned features have a point.

While they are pointed inward, philosophical discussions do not exist in a vacuum. Those outside of our community are affected by our discussions. Even if we were to restrict ourselves — misleadingly — to the work of particular recent individuals in English-speaking philosophy, we could name Thomas Kuhn and John Rawls as philosophers who have had an unequivocal effect on how their wider communities see their world. However, there is a wide range of mechanisms by which the philosophical understanding that belongs to *each of us* is spread beyond the philosophical community: classroom teaching, popular publishing, public speaking, professional collaboration and interaction, and other, more diffuse routes. Our work is picked up and disseminated by other philosophers, non-philosophical academics, students, journalists, and others. It would take enormous sociological and psychological work to trace and describe the influence of philosophical discourse, but even without such formal investigations I take the existence of such distribution to be backed by a

good deal of evidence. In this we do not differ from any other academic communities, including those in the sciences.

So, the first step that the contemporary academic philosopher must take in adopting the therapeutic approach to philosophy is to recognise that her primary explorations will be undertaken primarily within her community. As an academic philosopher, her primary task will be to talk to other philosophers about the poor, in the hope of finding new ways for the poor to understand themselves. If she opts to forego the practice of writing for her peers, she will lose the function that her community serves in vetting her work and allowing her work to be a part of a progressive conversation. Whether or not she decides to subsequently make an effort to *share* some of her work (or that of her community) directly with the poor (or the public in general) is a separate issue, one about which I will have something to say in the next section. My point so far is that there is epistemic virtue in our acting as members of an academic community, and directing our work primarily at each other.

It may be thought, however, that there is something wrong with this picture — which I am suggesting the therapeutically-minded philosopher must recognise — of philosophers talking primarily to each other. Why am I not calling for the ‘democratisation’ of philosophy, by bringing the poor into the conversation? Would that not serve the dual purpose of informing the conversation and spreading the word? The democratisation of philosophy is an important ideal that must be embraced when possible. Philosophy has become (slightly) more democratic as, for example, it has allowed more women to be involved in its discourse, and this change has been and will be good both for philosophy and (I would hazard to suggest) for women, and it must become more so in the future. But there are clear limits with respect to who can join a conversation within a philosophical community. Clearly, not everyone will be able to do this. Children and the mentally ill, for example, will not be able to join an academic philosophical discussion.

For very different reasons, it seems to me, the poor will also not be able to be full-fledged members of an academic philosophical community. This is not, as with children and the mentally ill, because they do not have the capacities for comprehension and creativity that are needed to join a community of philosophers. There is nothing about *being poor* that prevents someone from *doing philosophy*, understood as the enterprise of reflecting about central issues in one’s life; the poor are capable of a rich theoretical reflection about their condition,

and the aim in engaging in therapeutic philosophical work on their behalf is to support that reflection. Being poor is incompatible not with doing philosophy but with *joining a philosophical community*. In order to be a contributing member of an academic philosophical discussion, one has to have substantial resources; one needs, at a minimum, a great deal of education and time to join an academic philosophical conversation. Those in poverty lack not the capacity but the resources which it takes not only to keep up with the work that is done in a philosophical community, but also to do original philosophical work of one's own. Were we to come across someone who has the background and opportunity to follow and execute the work of a philosophical academic, then we would, I think, question whether they were poor at all.

This is not to say that the poor cannot *inform* the conversation that we have about them. On the contrary, they should.¹² This can be done in many ways: philosophers can interact with the poor, or they can read work by or interact with those who themselves interact with the poor. There are many ways in which the poor can inform the philosophical discussion that concerns them. Nevertheless, those who, as members of the group of people we call the poor, deserve our philosophical attention, are in virtue of their poverty unable to fully join our discussion.

3. Philosophy and Self-Understanding

One of the most important lessons about scientific practice to be learned from the work of Thomas Kuhn is that the end of the process of investigation, publishing, and debate is a remarkable unity among the members of the scientific community in their acceptance of theories.¹³ In scientific communities, presented or published work is either shot down or endorsed by the whole community; if the latter, then the claim is available for consideration or use. Once unity is achieved, scientific communities have strict mechanisms for banishing proponents of dissident positions. Dissident scientists are severely marginalised from the community; the 'creationist biologist' and the HIV-denier, for example, do not have access to the same kind of jobs or places for publication as those members of the biological or biochemical communities that toe the party line.

This fact has consequences for the nature of the contact that a layperson has with science. When a layperson comes across a pub-

lished and non-contested scientific claim — in the classroom, in a newspaper, or through the testimony of a friend — she can trust that this claim has the backing of a whole community of scientists behind it. In contrast, because the members of philosophical communities rarely reach this kind of agreement, that which is dispersed from the philosophical community — the ‘products of philosophy’, we might call them — are not going to come with the endorsement of the community as a whole. Members of philosophical communities do not see contributions to their debates as candidates for community-wide acceptance. Philosophers would like their work to be addressed, and to have influence, but they have no expectation that it will find widespread, much less community-wide, acceptance. Indeed, I suspect that most philosophers feel that a philosophical claim’s universal acceptance would be symptomatic of the community’s inattention to the topic at hand. A healthy philosophical community is aware of, and takes seriously, alternatives to the important claims in its midst. Philosophers see their work as contributions to an ongoing, exploratory discussion on a topic.

This means that the proper attitude for an outsider to take towards a philosophical claim (in contrast to claim endorsed by a scientific community) is never that which we take towards testimony; it is thoroughly improper to see a philosophical claim as backed by the authority of those who endorse it. The proper attitude for anyone — philosopher or non-philosopher — to take towards a philosophical claim is as a *candidate* for understanding. The discussion that takes place within a philosophical community, and the various positions it throws up, are *available for consideration*. There is an important sense in which the layperson (just like the rest of us) must be left to her own resources in assessing the merits of and deciding whether to adopt or accept a philosophical claim.¹⁴ Exposure to philosophical claims or arguments or debates may ‘ring true’ with her, they may fit with her experiences and the theoretical frameworks she carries with her; more importantly, they may help her better understand herself or her surroundings in some way.

In her book *Epistemic Injustice*, Miranda Fricker introduces the notion of a ‘hermeneutical lacuna’.¹⁵ One’s life is characterised by a hermeneutical lacuna if there is a gap in one’s ability to conceive and understand something that is going on around one. As none of us are omniscient, we all have gaps in our abilities to describe and explain features of our world, but some gaps in understanding one’s self and one’s world are more disadvantageous than others. Of the examples of

harmful gaps that Fricker discusses, one is drawn from the memoirs of the influential feminist journalist Susan Brownmiller.¹⁶ Brownmiller describes some of the events which led a group of activists at Cornell University in 1975 to invent the notion of *sexual harassment* to identify a form of behaviour that they wanted legal acknowledgement of. In this example, we have a clear case of a concept being created, one that will allow them and other people to fill their own hermeneutical lacunae, and in doing so to describe and explain a feature of their lives that is causing them pain.

The philosopher who approaches her work with its therapeutic potential in mind will see herself and the work done by her community as having the potential to offer candidates for filling gaps in understanding, that is, considerations with which people can improve their understanding of their selves and their world, considerations for inspiration and articulation. The example above emphasises the use of inventing a new concept — sexual harassment — to fill a hermeneutical lacuna, but the potential therapeutic value of philosophical work is not restricted to the new use of concepts or the use of new concepts. The non-philosopher exposed to philosophical work can come across deliberations which may raise for her an alternative way of seeing some feature of the world, or which may bring to her reflective awareness a question or feature of the world upon which she had not previously focused, or which may allow her to make a new connection among phenomena which are important to her. Any such exposure, by whatever mechanism it has come about, has the potential to improve the non-philosopher's life, to help her — returning again to the words of James Baldwin — to 'effect a truce with her reality'.

Once the nature of academic philosophical discourse is properly recognised, then we can see that there should be no concern that philosophers who are motivated by the therapeutic possibilities of philosophical work on poverty will be, in the conversations that they have with each other, 'telling the poor how to understand and run their own lives.' As we saw in the previous section, academic philosophical work is not and should not be — in the first instance — written for the poor *as its audience*; philosophers write for each other, and so the philosopher writing for therapeutic purposes will see her work as part of a dialogue which the non-philosopher can tap into, and in which she can find understanding, insight, or inspiration. Furthermore, the academic philosopher who writes about the poor within her community is well-aware that the context of her published work gives it a tentativeness that necessarily comes with being presented to a

philosophical community. The community will never come to agree that the work is correct, it will never endorse or back it in the way in which a scientific community does. So, to criticise philosophical work as ‘telling’ the poor how to live their lives is to misunderstand the way in which a philosophical community proceeds.

In so far as there is a need to avoid appearing as if one is ‘telling the poor how to live’, so far do individual philosophers have reason not to share their own work with the poor. In doing so, a philosopher would be defending her particular suggestions as to how a person in poverty should understand herself. There is some danger that her making such suggestions — especially from a philosopher without a considerable background of interaction with those in poverty — could be construed as patronising or condescending pronouncements from the ivory tower, even if she has modesty and the best of intentions. More deeply, as themselves not in a condition of poverty, philosophers are unlikely to have a good sense of what kinds of self-conceptions will prove most useful for the poor. In the light of this, the best way to proceed, it would seem, is for philosophers to remain in their primary roles of writing and speaking to each other, *at least* when doing philosophy for others in a therapeutic mode.

The fact that professional philosophers speak to each other severely limits the ways in which we can, professionally, contribute to the lives of the poor. Since we are not speaking directly to the poor, we cannot, as much as we might like to, ‘spread the word’ about certain things to them, to inform them or give them hope. As already noted, philosophers might decide to directly interact with the poor in some way informed by our work or the work of our community, but it will be outside of our roles as academic researchers. Again, it must be emphasised that the fact that professional philosophers are carrying on a conversation with each other serves important functions. First, it contextualises our contributions in a larger discussion; what we say is, as it were, surrounded by the differing approaches that other philosophers have to the same topic. Furthermore, the fact that we speak to each other allows, indeed *forces*, the conversation to move onward; those who attempt to repeat the obvious to the philosophical community are not listened to for very long. By introducing and carrying on a conversation about the poor among ourselves, we as a community can explore *new* ways by which the poor can conceive of and understand their situation, and we can newly examine the tenability of the old ways by which they have long done so. The hope is that in carrying on an imaginative, careful, internal conversation about the

situation of the poor, a philosophical community will find itself clarifying or inventing new ideas which the poor, or those who interact with the poor, may isolate, develop, and embrace as their own. In deciding not to defend their ideas or arguments directly before the poor, a philosopher may more readily ensure that therapeutic philosophical work is properly seen as creating a body of ideas for the inspiration of the poor, and not a body of prescriptions handed down from outside their situation.

4. Areas for Therapeutic Philosophical Work on Poverty

I want now to look at three areas in which we might say there are hermeneutical lacunae in the lives of the poor, lacunae that, it seems to me, might be filled with philosophical work. What I have to say in each of these areas will be brief and non-committal. My aim is not to do philosophical work in these areas, but to suggest that worthwhile and potentially therapeutic philosophical work can and should be done in these areas.

A. The Moral Relationship between the Poor and the Non-Poor

As we have learned over the past two hundred years, one of the most challenging aspects of social inequality is how to properly describe it. The work leading up to, including, and following on from that of Karl Marx has taught us that the components of social inequality are deeply complex and susceptible to a wide range of interpretations. This applies, perhaps most importantly, to the evaluative aspects of social inequality. If one had to name the most significant, widespread, and difficult question of the last two centuries, I think that ‘What are the moral dimensions of social inequality?’ would be a good candidate.

Some of the most important philosophical work on poverty in recent years has aimed at establishing that the relationship between the poor and the non-poor has a moral dimension. In particular, such work has attempted to establish that the non-poor (or non-poor countries) owe something to the poor (or poor countries),¹⁷ an obligation that has come about as the result of certain past and present actions that the non-poor (or non-poor countries) have performed.¹⁸ Such work has tended to focus on the non-poor side of the relationship — what the non-poor have done or are doing to the poor, and what, if anything, the non-poor owe to the poor. I believe that philosophers should also turn to focus on the other side of this relationship, on how

to properly describe the moral situation that they are in. The moral situation of the poor is deeply complex, and the poor could benefit by more theoretical and conceptual work being done to understand the moral status of their situation. Philosophers, I think, are well placed to carry out some of this work.

To give an indication of the difficulty in describing the moral situation of the poor, let us look at some of the simpler ways of describing it. Once we agree that the poor have or are suffering a kind of harm, one of the first questions that arises, and that we can ask on their behalf, is ‘What brought this harm about?’ All answers to this question are either unsatisfactory or have challenging consequences.

Here is a first candidate for describing their moral status: the poor have been harmed, but they have suffered no wrongdoing. That is, we might say that, even though the situation of the poor is harmful, this harm has not been brought about as the result of some injustice. This description may be accurate for some instances of poverty, but certainly not for the vast majority of poverty in the world. Colonialism, slavery, and overt political discrimination have been the causes of much poverty in the world; poverty is their legacy, even if they come to an end. The difficulty with these kinds of broad injustices is that it is difficult to identify a wrongdoer; the wrongdoings that have brought about much poverty in the world — colonialism, slavery, and political discrimination — are not, in most cases, wrongdoings that we can attribute to individual persons. To point to certain persons and say that *they* were the ones responsible for the creation and implementation, for example, of apartheid in South Africa seems inadequate; responsibility for apartheid stretches far beyond a few people in the South African government and the police force, to those who voted for the apartheid government, to others throughout the world who economically and militarily supported it, and perhaps — even more broadly — to those who were not active enough in opposing it. There seem to be *no* clear criteria by which we can identify those responsible for apartheid and the poverty that has resulted from it.¹⁹

Two responses to this difficulty seem possible. First, we can say that there are particular persons responsible for poverty in South Africa, but that those persons are in principle unidentifiable. A second response moves away from thinking of responsible agents as only human beings; theoreticians have explored the notions of collective agency and responsibility, attempting to show how institutions, races, or communities are agents who can be held responsible for wrongdoings. Such moves may, ultimately, be successful, but they must over-

come counterintuitive metaphysical consequences.²⁰ How, precisely, are we to understand, for example, how a community or a race, for example, is to be held responsible for apartheid given that many people in the community or race were actively opposing it? In any event, it would seem as if the poor have two options for viewing their moral status: the wrongdoing that generated their poverty was carried out either (i) by perpetrators who are in principle unidentifiable or (ii) by a strange and perplexing agent, like a community, a race, or a government. Either of these situations leaves the poor, I suggest, in an *emotionally* challenging condition, a condition in which they may benefit from imaginative theoretical clarification.

To see the challenging condition that they are in, let us reflect upon how our moral emotions come to perform an important — and, it should be emphasised, *therapeutic* — role in our lives. It is reasonable to suspect that our emotional and attitudinal vocabulary for responding to moral situations is formed in certain paradigm interpersonal scenarios, in which both the (supposed) wrongdoing and the (supposed) wrongdoer are clearly identifiable. We learn about *indignation* and *anger* in situations in which another identifiable person wrongs us; we learn about *guilt* and *shame* when we ourselves realise our own wrongdoings. These emotions play themselves out in our lives in our subsequent interactions with the identifiable wrongdoers involved. We *express* our indignation, and perhaps *seek* revenge or punishment, upon those individuals who wrong us; we *apologise* to someone we have wronged. These moral emotions lead us to act in such a way that the emotions can be alleviated, assuaged, or disappear. This is their function; they aide in our responding to or resolving the wrongdoings in which we have been involved.

Moral situations which diverge from these paradigmatic scenarios, in which wrongdoings are not clear or in which wrongdoers are not identifiable, are likely to be challenging. If I feel indignation at being wronged, but the wrongdoer is in principle unidentifiable or a strange metaphysical entity like a race or a government, then coming to form the moral emotion that will allow me to resolve, respond to, or in some other way get past this situation, may be difficult. When we find ourselves unable to identify a wrongdoer or for it to be one — like a government or race — that does not sit well as an object of our moral emotions, it will be all the more difficult to find the right emotional response to the harm we have suffered. This seems to be precisely the situation of the poor. It would seem that their poverty is the result of wrongdoing, but the wrongdoers are either unidentifiable in principle,

or are the kinds of agents — cultures, races, countries, governments — which sit uneasily as the objects of moral emotions like hatred, anger, resentment, and the taking of offense. This is not to say that these emotions are not the right sorts of emotions to have, but whether they are, and the ways in which they should play themselves out in the lives of the poor, the ways in which they should motivate the poor, deserve exploration. Exploration of this kind, I think, philosophers are in a strong position to embark upon.²¹

B. Belonging to a Community of Wrongdoers

Poor urban communities are thought of as crime-ridden and dangerous not just to those who visit but to those who live there. One common explanation of this feature appeals to a correlation between *being poor* and *acting immorally*: a life of poverty leads one to be more likely to act immorally. Is this explanation accurate? Does being poor make one more likely to act immorally?

The answer to this question is, of course, partly empirical, but it may not be wholly so. It is well-known that poverty is correlated with a wide range of phenomena that are disruptive of responsible behaviour: alcoholism and drug addiction, mental illness, neglectful and violent upbringing, and malnutrition. This list — and it is a list that could be made much longer — is a familiar list of excusing conditions (conditions under which we have a tendency to deny that an agent is responsible for some action that he performs) and exempting conditions (conditions under which we have a tendency to exempt someone from agency altogether).²² If being poor is correlated with many of these phenomena, and these phenomena are in turn excusing or exempting conditions, then does it not follow that the poor are not responsible for many of their apparent wrongdoings? Put most generally, does it not follow that poverty brings about a loss of agency? If there is anything to this thought, then while a poor community may indeed be a violent and dangerous place to be, it is not obviously a community in which the presence of immorality is higher than that of any other community, for many of the apparent wrongdoings that take place there are excusable, and thus not wrongdoings at all. This argument, it seems to me, deserves some philosophical attention.

Moreover, if the argument does not go through, and there is, after all, a correlation between *being poor* and *acting immorally*, then the presence of this correlation deserves a different kind of philosophical attention. Perhaps the most important area of discussion here is that of the causal relation which accounts for this correlation. Is it that poverty

demands compromises? Or is it that poverty erodes social and other commitments? Again, it is clear that this is to some extent an empirical matter, but not wholly so. Philosophers are well-placed to suggest new ways of explaining this relationship, even if they are not well-placed to psychologically or sociologically expand and test hypotheses.

What is the therapeutic importance of work in this area? It is largely a matter of self-conception. For many people, the discovery that oneself, one's family, and the members of one's community, are characterised by a feature that is correlated with being immoral, will be disturbing, a matter of concern. Poverty is not the only common feature that has a possible correlation with immorality. There is evidence for a correlation between enjoying pornography, aggressive music, and violent motion pictures, on the one hand, and a tendency to sexist or violent behaviour;²³ similarly, there is evidence for a correlation between playing violent video games and having a tendency to violence.²⁴ Whether or not these correlations actually exist, it is not out of place for an avid enthusiast of horror films, or the person who was an adolescent fan of heavy metal, to take these suspicions seriously, and to be concerned about his own tendencies. If nothing else, the former fan of heavy metal, like the person in poverty, may be in the position of having no theoretical framework in which to place this apparent correlation. As a consequence, he has no framework to help him come to grips with, and perhaps avoid the manifestations of, an apparent, latent tendency to immoral behaviour. In short, philosophical discussion has the potential to help the poor to understand the meaning and significance of the correlation between their poverty and a tendency to immoral behaviour.

C. Poverty and the Good Life

A third way in which philosophical work might be of therapeutic value for the poor is by expanding or enriching their conceptions of the good lives open to them. The possibility that I wish to explore here is that of the poor embracing or being proud of features of their life; that is, I wish to explore a route via which philosophical discussion might allow the poor to *affirm* features of their lives.²⁵

Such a discussion might begin by exploring the various religious traditions in which a high value is placed on the life of poverty. A number of the major world religions include reference to such a value, but it is perhaps most prominent in certain Christian traditions. In two

well-known passages in the New Testament book of *Luke*, Jesus appears to praise a life of economic deprivation. In the first, he says ‘Every one of you who does not renounce all that he possesses, cannot be my disciple’ (14:33), and in the second, he says, ‘It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God’ (18:25). These statements, and others like them, have been embraced in a range of ways by in the Christian church, in the ‘vows of poverty’ taken by those who enter a number of Catholic orders, for example, and by the members of the sixteenth-century German protestant sect called the Anabaptists, who cut their ties with material possessions by sharing them with other members of their community.²⁶

These long traditions point to a range of reasons for embracing at least some features of the life of poverty. A life of poverty, its Christian defender may suggest, is more likely to be a led by proper evaluative priorities, a life in which what is important — God and the life he wants us to lead — has nothing to do with what poverty takes away. As the life without the mirage of things with only apparent value, the life of poverty allows you to properly grasp what is truly valuable. Alternatively, the Christian defender of the value of the life of poverty might suggest that being poor allows one to grasp our true dependence upon God. The poor are deeply vulnerable; they do not have the kind of safety net — one which comes with a regular salary, employability, education, and a formal and informal system of insurance — that the non-poor have. Such a safety net, according to the Christian defender of the value of poverty, can leave the non-poor with the impression that they are self-sufficient, an impression which is false and may be dangerous.

I am imagining a philosophical discussion aimed at finding ways in which the poor could embrace or affirm features of their lives. This discussion begins with looking at some of the reasons for which Christians have taken on features of the life of poverty. Might those philosophers engaged in this imagined discussion be able to export these reasons into a broader secular context, one which does not presume the commitment to a belief in God’s existence? I find no reason to think that that they could not. Even working within a non-theistic view of value, it may be arguable that the life of poverty can allow one to see — perhaps, indeed, as no other form of life can — where the values of life really lie. And, again, working within a non-theistic view, it may be arguable that the life of poverty allows one to truly grasp the scope and depth of human vulnerability.

In suggesting that we might examine reasons to undertake the vow of poverty in order to find ways in which the poor could affirm features of their lives is to say neither that the vow of poverty is the same thing as poverty, nor that poverty *tout court* is something that one should be led to celebrate. On the contrary, taking the vow of poverty is not (necessarily) to become poor, anymore than taking the vow of chastity is to become impotent. Nevertheless, it seems to me that one can look to the reasons that people have found to take on *certain features* of the life of the poor — just as they have found reasons to take on certain features of the life of the impotent — in order to discover how those features might be embraceable even if one did not choose them. The aim is not to advocate poverty; *that* aim would be nothing short of offensive. Rather, the aim, to return to Baldwin's phrase, is to aide the poor in coming to a truce with their lives.²⁷

There is a danger that any work exploring features of the life of poverty that can be embraced will be appropriated by those wishing to criticise poverty-relieving policies or programs.²⁸ Such an appropriation would, of course, be wholly inappropriate. It is like appealing to the fact that those who are inflicted with disease have a stronger sense of their embodiment and mortality in order to advocate reducing funds for disease research or medical care. That the poor *can* reconcile themselves to features of their lives in no way implies that their lives should be as they are, nor that we should not do all that we can do to change their lives. The fact that it is possible — or even *likely* — that certain work in philosophy can be appropriated in such a misguided way, does not count against its being done. If I am right that therapeutic philosophical work can bring about benefit to the poor, then it should be done. The irrational and mistaken appropriation of such work must be resisted at the stage of that appropriation, and not before. The potential harm that results from our work must not lead us to abstain from doing it, if it is clear that such harms would be the result of irrational misuse.²⁹

In the first section of this paper, I responded to an objection against taking a therapeutic approach to philosophical work on poverty; poverty, the objection stated, should be *fought*, and not come to terms with. My response was that the fight against poverty will be a long, if not permanent, fight, and that we must not ignore those who, in the midst of that fight, have to live their lives in poverty. However, in the light of my suggestion that poverty might be affirmed, a related, and deeper, concern arises: philosophical work that aims to offer the poor new ways in which they can understand, and thus better live with,

their situation, will disincline those in poverty to combat their situation. The thought is that if someone recognises that she has gained something from being put in an unfortunate situation, the consequence may be that she is less inclined to resist it. This, it might be said, is a strike against the therapeutic approach to philosophical work on poverty; it may lead the poor themselves to opt out of the fight against their situation.

If there is a tension between accepting one's situation and being inclined to fight it, it is a tension inherent in living a life of deprivation and oppression. In making this point, I want to return to the work of James Baldwin. In his remarkable essay 'Notes of a Native Son', Baldwin reflects upon his growing awareness, as a young man, of the hatred and anger brought about by his life in 1940s America. He came to realise that this hatred and anger is dangerous, and something that he would have to give up. At the end of the essay, he writes:

It began to seem that one would have to hold in the mind forever two ideas which seemed to be in opposition. The first idea was acceptance, the acceptance totally without rancor, of life as it is, and men as they are: in the light of this idea, it goes without saying that injustice is a commonplace. But this did not mean that one could be complacent, for the second idea was of equal power: that one must never, in one's life, accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all one's strength. This fight begins, however, in the heart....³⁰

In the first part of the quotation, Baldwin is repeating the thought expressed through his words at the beginning of this paper: he needed to come to a 'truce' with his own race and the pain that it caused him. It is this that I have been suggesting can be aided by therapeutic philosophical work, and it is this which may, indeed, lead one to be less likely to fight to change one's situation or the injustices that accompany it. It is in the last sentence of this quotation that connects these two: coming to grips with one's life and one's situation can enable one to live the life of resistance and triumph. Should a poor person come to an understanding of her moral relationship to the non-poor, and the proper emotions to feel towards the non-poor; should she come to understand her own goodness and vulnerability to wrongdoing; should she come to see the goodness of her life — a life that she can be proud of — in spite of its being a life that should have been different; should some or all of these happen, this person will have gone some way towards coming to a truce with herself and her life. And it is easy to see that someone with that kind of clear-sightedness about

herself and her situation will be in a better position to more effectively oppose her situation and the social forces that have brought it about, rather than allowing those forces to defeat her.

5. Conclusion

This paper is part of a larger project, inspired by the therapy-oriented schools of Greek and Roman philosophy, of exploring ways in which philosophy might be successfully guided by the particular aim of finding various ways in which (certain groups of) people can understand themselves. The guiding assumptions of this project are that certain changes in one's conception of oneself can improve one's life in some way or another, and that philosophers are well-placed to do this kind of abstract but imaginative work. I do not wish to embrace the particular commitments of any of the Ancient schools; on the contrary, as I have argued above, it is important to modernise the therapeutic aim with respect both to the current plight of (certain groups of) persons in the world and to the current structure of philosophy and the ways in which it gets done. The target group of the present paper is the poor, those who have suffered as the result of economic deprivation, and my hope is that other philosophers will join me in pursuing therapeutic work targeting not only the poor but other groups as well.

The picture that I have sketched in this paper will strike some readers as an untenable (if not unsavory) advocacy of a kind of social engagement from the ivory tower. I have argued that there are creative and epistemic possibilities to be found in a community of philosophers engaged in an internal dialogue, and I have been encouraging philosophers to engage in such an internal dialogue with the therapeutic aim of aiding the poor. While I would in no way wish to discourage input to this discussion from the poor, either directly or indirectly, it is clear that the circumstances of the poor do not allow them to join this dialogue as full-fledged members. What is more, I have argued that philosophers are probably not well-placed to share their positions with the poor, as they are not themselves in a position to know what will provide the most useful, therapeutic forms of understanding for the poor. How do I reconcile all of this? In short, I see the therapeutic work undertaken by a philosophical community as a font of potentially useful concepts, thoughts, arguments, and considerations. Philosophical work can be a repository

into which those who are interested in the poor, who work with the poor, advocate for the poor, or are poor themselves, can find inspiration. The aim is that these concepts, thoughts, arguments, or considerations will allow the poor themselves to take steps 'to effect some kind of truce' with their situations.

To advocate, as I have done in this paper, that professional philosophers engage in certain work on behalf of the poor, is by no means to suggest that philosophers are in a unique position to do this kind of work. We are not. Other academic communities will be in similar positions. Creative artists of all kinds — musical, literary, theatrical, visual — are in similar positions. It is also important to realise that the poor themselves are, like the rest of us, deeply reflective about their own lives, and they have *always* been engaged in projects through which they try and come to grips with their lives. Philosophers are different from these communities, and the poor themselves, only in that we are trained in, and part of, a particular long tradition of thinking about certain central features of the human condition. This is a tradition in which groups of people have thought long and hard about issues of value, morality, and the good life. My suggestion is that by bringing that tradition to bear on the lives of the poor, we may, in our discussions with each other, stumble upon ways of thinking about the poor that they themselves find valuable.³¹

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Notes

1. 'Autobiographical Notes', his preface to *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), reprinted in Baldwin (1998), quotation at page 6.
2. The following readings on the various manifestations of poverty are those that I have found most helpful: Lewis (1968), Holman (1978), Sen (1981) Chapter 2, Ray (2006). While a great deal of what I will say in Section 4 of this paper has been inspired by these writers, nothing I say depends upon a wholesale acceptance of their approaches.
3. Oscar Lewis argues that preliterate peoples, the lower castes in India, the Jews of eastern Europe before the twentieth century, and many people in Marxist/socialist countries like Cuba are economically deficient but without what he calls a 'culture of poverty'. (Lewis 1968) 193ff.

4. Both translations are by Martha Nussbaum, and are taken from Nussbaum (1994) Chapter 1. Original sources are: (i) Galen, *On the Views of Hippocrates and Plato*, and (ii) Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*.
5. I do not doubt that such work could also have other benefits, like allowing the non-poor to better understand the poor, and thus to improve our relationship with and treatment of them.
6. Translation by Nussbaum, taken from her (1994), Chapter 1. Original source is the collection of fragments in Usener (1987).
7. For the Epicureans and the Sceptics this is *ataraxia* — freedom from anxiety; for the Stoics, it is *apatheia* — a lack of emotions or passions.
8. See Sextus Empiricus (1994) Book I Section iv, for a clear declaration of the Sceptic's aim; see Cooper (2004) for a concise discussion of the Stoic's and the Epicurean's aims.
9. See, e.g., Singer (2008) and Pogge (2009).
10. Henry Odera Oruka argues that those he calls 'sage-philosophers' — the 'critical and independent thinkers' found in parts of sub-Saharan Africa who belong to no academic community and may not even be literate — deserve as much as anyone to be called 'philosophers'. See Oruka (1983).
11. And his teaching is, by and large, concerned with sharing intra-community work with those who are not (yet) members of that community.
12. I will not argue that they *must*, although I have been encouraged to do so by Nimi Hoffmann. I am grateful for her persistence in this area of my discussion.
13. Kuhn (1970). This claim is central to Kuhn's picture of science, and he rallies extensive evidence for it in his book; I will not rehearse any of this evidence here. I utilise this feature of science (and discuss it at further length than I do here) in Jones (2002).
14. For a recent discussion of this point, see Huenemann (2004).
15. Fricker (2007) Chapter 7.
16. Brownmiller (1990).
17. See, e.g., Singer (1972).
18. See, e.g., Pogge (2004).
19. For more on this problem and its possible solutions, see May and Hoffmann (1991).
20. For a statement of the problem here, and an attempt to avoid it, see Tollefsen (2003).
21. The growing literature on reconciliation will be relevant here, although perhaps not directly so. I take it that in thinking about how the poor should respond emotionally to their situation, our aim is not a matter of the poor being reconciled with the non-poor, but with the more subjective aim of the poor's being reconciled with themselves.
22. For the distinction between excuses and exemptions, see Watson (1987).
23. For a review of evidence for a correlation between pornography spectatorship and sexual aggression, see Malamuth, Addison, and Koss (2000); for a (skeptical) review of the literature on a correlation between rap music and violence, see Tatum (1999); for a review of the correlation between media violence in general and aggressive behaviour, see Huesmann and Taylor (2006).
24. For a review of the empirical literature on video games and violence, see Anderson and Bushman (2002).

25. The notion of affirmation is often associated with the work of Nietzsche. See, for example, Reginster (2006).
26. It goes without saying that these traditions are not embraced by all Christians, nor do they represent *the* Christian attitude towards poverty — whatever that might be.
27. I have suggested that certain Christian ways of thought could provide inspiration for this kind of philosophical discussion, but there are other sources that could be used as well; Buddha, Mahatma Ghandi, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Leo Tolstoy are some of the leaders and writers who embraced features of the life of the poor. The recent movement known as Post-Development Theory might also provide a source of inspiration here; see Rahnema and Bawtree (1997).
28. Oscar Lewis, the anthropologist whose work revealed ways in which what he called a ‘culture of poverty’ allowed the poor to better cope with their situation, had his work so appropriated. He is explicit that such readers ‘misunderstood’ his work; see Lewis (1968) 199.
29. Larry May disagrees with this; see May (1989), an expanded version of which appears in (1992) Chapter 7.
30. Reprinted in Baldwin (1998) quotation at page 84.
31. Thanks to Nimi Hoffmann, Lindsay Kelland, Chris Kelly, Mawangu Mingiedi, Pedro Tabensky, Rosa Terlazzo, Marius Vermaak, Samantha Vice, and audiences at Rhodes University and at Lucy Allais’ conference, ‘Poverty, Charity, Justice’, at the University of the Witwatersrand (March 2010).

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