

# Collective Responsibility and Global Poverty

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**ABSTRACT:** *Peter Singer argues that individuals in high-income nations have a moral obligation to increase their charitable contributions to those living in extreme poverty or threatened by a humanitarian crisis. This paper will argue that high-income countries, as distinct from the obligations of their residents, have a collective responsibility to determine how, through the use of evidence and reason, to best prevent suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care, and take sustained action on that basis. This paper will draw on effective altruism and collective responsibility to reconceptualize the moral obligations of high-income nations with respect to the alleviation of global poverty.*

**KEYWORDS:** *collective responsibility, global poverty, humanitarian aid, Peter Singer*

## I. PROBLEM

Today, about 700 million people live in extreme poverty.<sup>1</sup> Conservative estimates indicate that well-directed expenditures of \$175 billion per year for 20 years can end extreme poverty; however, annual global humanitarian aid only totals \$29.6 billion.<sup>2 3</sup> While projections vary, it is expected that *at least* 500 million people will be living in extreme poverty in 2030 and millions will continue to die from preventable diseases.<sup>4</sup> In 2017, more people died due to diarrheal diseases than the combined global deaths attributed to suicide, homicide, conflict, and terrorism combined.<sup>5</sup> Oral rehydration therapy (ORT) costs \$14.28 and has saved more than 70 million lives since its implementation.<sup>6</sup> If aid organizations received more money to provide ORT and other life-saving and cost-effective treatments to those living in extreme poverty, more lives could be saved. Market institutions and economic growth in developing countries, especially in China, contributed to significant reductions in extreme poverty. Since 1980, the percentage of the world's population living in global poverty decreased from over 40% of the world's population to 9.2%.<sup>7</sup> Yet, some countries skeptical of market-based

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<sup>1</sup> The World Bank, "World Development Indicators." Data for *Poverty Headcount Ratio at \$1.90 a day (2011 PPP) (% of population) - World* [Data file from the World Bank, Development Research Group] (2019).

<sup>2</sup> Sachs, Jeffrey D. *The end of poverty: Economic possibilities for our time*. Penguin, 2006: 218.

<sup>3</sup> GHA. Global Humanitarian Assistance Report, 2020: 28.

<sup>4</sup> Max Roser and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina (2013) - "Global Extreme Poverty: Is the world on track to end extreme poverty by 2030?". Published online at OurWorldInData.org.

<sup>5</sup> Bernadeta Dadonaite, Hannah Ritchie and Max Roser (2018) - "Diarrheal diseases". Published online at OurWorldInData.org.

<sup>6</sup> Mosegui, Gabriela G., Cid M. Vianna, Marcus S. Rodrigues, Paula M. Valle, and Frances V. Silva. "Cost-effectiveness analysis of oral rehydration therapy compared to intravenous rehydration for acute gastroenteritis without severe dehydration treatment." *Journal of infection and public health* 12, no. 6 (2019): 816.

<sup>7</sup> The World Bank, "World Development Indicators." Data for *Poverty Headcount Ratio at \$1.90 a day (2011 PPP) (% of population) - World* [Data file from the World Bank, Development Research Group] (2019).

reforms are being left behind to the detriment of their poorest residents and insufficient humanitarian aid contributions will fail to save millions of lives.

Increased and sustained contributions to humanitarian causes are urgently needed if global poverty is to be eradicated within the next twenty years. While the combined annual GDP of high-income countries is \$55.41 trillion, these countries give paltry amounts of foreign aid.<sup>8</sup> When the U.S. provides aid, for example, it focuses on winning the international support of developing countries and not on investing in life-saving interventions for the global poor.<sup>9</sup> If 4.0% of the U.S. federal budget was aimed at eradicating extreme poverty every year for 20 years, the U.S. could unilaterally eradicate extreme poverty.<sup>10</sup> Approximately 1% of the United States (U.S.) federal budget is allotted for foreign assistance; moreover, only 0.1% of the U.S. federal budget is dedicated to humanitarian assistance (approximately \$6 billion). There is a clear gap between what the U.S. *ought* to contribute towards global poverty alleviation and what the U.S. *actually* gives. In public opinion polls, Americans wrongly believe that up to 25% of the federal budget is being dedicated to foreign aid and humanitarian assistance.<sup>11</sup> There is also a gap between what the U.S. *actually* contributes to global poverty alleviation and what Americans *think* their country contributes to global poverty reduction.

## II. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, the effective altruist movement persuaded thousands of individuals to sign the “Giving What We Can” pledge, which will increase financial transfers to causes and charities that reduce human suffering and prevent future human suffering in the most cost-effective ways. While Peter Singer and Will MacAskill persuasively outline the moral obligations of individuals with respect to the alleviation of global poverty, no one has evaluated the moral obligations of other agents, beyond individual persons, to foster a reduction in extreme poverty. If Singer is right in claiming that individuals have a responsibility to save the lives of those who live in extreme poverty, is it the case that *some* groups have the same obligation? While there are different *types* of groups, this paper advances the claim that high-income countries, as distinct from their residents, possess a moral obligation to, through the use of evidence and reason, increase joint contributions of humanitarian aid in order to save the lives of those living in extreme poverty.

In making this argument, this paper defends the attribution of moral agency, as a property, to high-income countries. Given the internal command structure of high-income countries, countries possess the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for

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<sup>8</sup> The World Bank, “World Development Indicators.” Data for *GDP (current US\$) – High Income*, [Data file from the World Bank, Development Research Group] (2019).

<sup>9</sup> Wittkopf, Eugene R. “Foreign aid and United Nations votes: A comparative study.” *The American Political Science Review* 67, no. 3 (1973): 887.

<sup>10</sup> Congressional Budget Office, “The Federal Budget in 2019.” *CBO.gov* (2019). Retrieved from: <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2020-04/56324-CBO-2019-budget-infographic.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Milner, Helen V., and Dustin Tingley. “Public opinion and foreign aid: A review essay.” *International Interactions* 39, no. 3 (2013): 389-392.

moral responsibility: the epistemic condition and the control condition. If this paper succeeds in defending this claim, it follows that the negative duties of high-income countries are logically and morally equivalent to their positive duties. If nations are moral agents, they may be morally responsible for what they do and what they *fail* to do. It is necessary to briefly distinguish collective responsibility from shared responsibility. Shared responsibility is the view that *all* members of a group *share* in the blameworthiness or praiseworthiness of a group's actions and it is not the type of responsibility that I wish to defend in this paper; collective responsibility is the view that the *group* be the recipient of moral praise or blame without all group members being responsible or equally responsible. First, I will show why it is reasonable to extend moral obligations typically associated with individuals to countries. Second, I will present similar but different accounts of the necessary and sufficient conditions required for moral agency. Third, I will argue that nations meet the necessary and sufficient conditions required for moral agency. Fourth, I will provide reasoning for why it is important for nations to be thought of as moral agents. Fifth, I will outline critical objections posed by proponents of methodological individualism and other views antithetical to collective responsibility and provide responses to each. Finally, I conclude that nations satisfy conditions required for moral agency and that the arguments made by effective altruists succeed in being extended to high-income countries as distinct from their residents.

### III. INDIVIDUALS AND NATIONS

Peter Singer's oft-referenced thought experiment "The Drowning Child and the Expanding Circle" challenges readers living in affluent countries to consider their moral obligations to the global poor. Suppose, says Singer, that you see a child drowning in a shallow pond while you are walking to class. To save the baby would simply require entering the shallow pond and pulling the child out of the pond; while it would not put your life in danger, it would get you wet and muddy as well as late for class.<sup>12</sup> In this situation, do you have a moral obligation to save the child drowning in a shallow pond? Most people reply in the affirmative without hesitation. The standard reasoning follows: The suffering and death of a child or adult is bad and if you can prevent suffering and death without sacrificing something of comparable significance, you should do so.<sup>13</sup> Since a child drowning is bad and since the state of being wet, dirty, and late for class is trivial in comparison to the value of saving the child's life, it seems only logical to save the child. If another student saw the child drowning, would it be relevant to your obligation to save the child? Most people reply in the negative: If someone else ignores their duty to save the child's life, this is an insufficient justification for you to ignore the child as well.<sup>14</sup> If the child was drowning in another country and if you could save the child's life, with absolute certainty through a small donation, would you still

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<sup>12</sup> Singer, Peter. "The Drowning Child and the Expanding Circle." *New Internationalist* (1997).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

possess a moral obligation to save the child's life? Most people reply in the affirmative: The nationality and distance of the child is inconsequential, so you should save the child's life if you can do so without sacrificing something of comparable significance.<sup>15</sup> The implication of this thought experiment, notes Singer, is that people *ought* to try and save the lives of those living in countries other than their own, through modest financial contributions.<sup>16</sup> Do nations have the same moral obligation that people do, namely, to save lives that can be prevented without sacrificing things of comparable significance? Consider the following thought experiment, *70 Refugees Out At Sea*, which follows.

Suppose that an officer of the Maltese Navy is on patrol in the Mediterranean Sea 20 miles off the coast of Malta. The officer notices a small migrant vessel in the distance. As the patrol boat approaches, the officer realizes that there are approximately 70 refugees aboard the vessel. The officer knows that there is a Mediterranean tropical-like cyclone expected to hit the coast within the next day. If the officer provides aid to the refugees, 70 lives might be saved. If the officer does not rescue the refugees, all 70 will likely drown in the storm. The officer relays this information to the lieutenant colonel of the Maltese Navy. The lieutenant colonel of the Maltese Navy consults with the Commander of the Armed Forces and the Minister for Home Affairs and National Security (both of whom are appointed by the President of Malta). The lieutenant colonel of the Maltese Navy orders the officer to abandon the small migrant vessel. This thought experiment, *70 Refugees Out At Sea*, raises a key question: Does Malta have a responsibility to rescue the migrants? Most people would answer in the affirmative: The suffering and death of the refugees would be bad, the cost to save the lives of the refugees from certain death is trivial to Malta, and Malta *could* save the lives the drifting migrants. A natural extension of Singer's line of reasoning entails that refugee policies of other countries near Malta, such as Italy or Greece, should have no impact on Malta's responsibility to save the refugees' lives. Note, this paper has not yet asked whether individuals within this thought experiment bear responsibility to save the lives of the refugees. This question will be addressed later on. The aforementioned thought experiment seeks to extend Singer's argument to high-income countries. In both cases, four premises hold true. First, the suffering and death of "normal" and healthy human beings from lack of food, shelter, and medical care is bad. Second, if a high-income country can prevent death and suffering, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, a high-income country ought, morally, to do it. Third, there is no morally relevant distinction between cases in which a high-income country can act unilaterally and in which a high-income country can act multilaterally. Fourth, geographical distance and international relations between any two given countries is morally irrelevant.<sup>17</sup>

At the surface level, if nations are agents, they may possess responsibility for what they do *and* what they fail to do. The problem of extreme poverty or the violation of human rights, normalized in some developing countries, should apply. Consider the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Singer, Peter. "Famine, affluence, and morality." *Philosophy & public affairs* (1972): 229- 243.

Rawlsian conception of justice: (1) Each person has a right to liberty and (2) inequalities are arbitrary unless they work for the advantage of all.<sup>18</sup> Rawls imagines a situation, an initial position, in which no one knows their socio-economic status, race, sex, or any of their attributes. In this initial position, asks Rawls, what political-legal structure would be considered *just* for these rational and mutually disinterested persons? According to Rawls, people would establish a society whose political-legal structure required equality in basic rights and in which every change in the social structure would aim to benefit the worst off group in society. Of particular note, Rawls states that ‘persons’ may refer to individual human beings, but it also could refer to nations, provinces, businesses, churches, and other groups.<sup>19</sup> While Rawls does not pursue this idea to its natural conclusion, this paper will do so. Consider the following thought experiment, *A Theory of International Justice*, which follows. Suppose the heads of state for each country meet for a conference. Upon arrival, each head of state is affected by amnesia and each forgets which country they represent as well as differences in standards of living experienced by each country. In short, the heads of state have no way of knowing whether their country is better or worse off with respect to the current global distribution of financial and natural resources. If these leaders had the opportunity to create global norms related to international justice that would impact supranational organizations, trade, and humanitarian assistance, what would they be? One answer, similar to the one offered by David Miller, is that nations would agree upon an international order where basic human rights are prioritized and ensured; similarly, policies within the international order would first aim to benefit the least developed countries.<sup>20</sup> Today, basic human rights are not protected around the world and international commitments to humanitarian assistance have fallen short of the mark. Humanitarian assistance should not be merely appreciated by the developing country recipient, but high-income countries should be expected to make such contributions.

#### IV. VARYING CONCEPTIONS OF MORAL AGENCY

In order for nations to possess moral responsibility for their actions, it must be established that nations possess moral agency. There is significant disagreement regarding the necessary and sufficient conditions required for an agent to meet the requirements possessed by the set of all moral agents. Nevertheless, philosophers sometimes recognize two necessary and jointly sufficient conditions required for an agent to be a moral agent. The first is the “freedom condition,” which is present when an agent possesses control of their actions. The second is the “knowledge condition,” which is present when an agent is aware of the consequences and moral significance of their actions. Since the corpus of philosophical work does not presently recognize nations as moral agents, it is necessary to outline two accounts of moral agency, offered

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<sup>18</sup> Rawls, John. "Justice as fairness." *The philosophical review* 67, no. 2 (1958): 165.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>20</sup> Miller, David. "National responsibility and global justice." *Critical review of international social and political philosophy* 11, no. 4 (2008): 395-396.

by Peter French and Virginia Held, that appear to accommodate *some* types of groups. This section will also present an account of moral agency, detailed by John Fischer, that objects to Harry Frankfurt's view regarding the dissociation of responsibility from the "freedom condition" and the view that determinism is consistent with responsibility.

This section is concerned with presenting Peter French's conception of moral agency. According to French, 'moral person' describes the *referent* of any proper name or description that can be a non-eliminatable subject of responsibility ascription.<sup>21</sup> What is a non-eliminatable subject? Since 'responsibility' is neutral, the quality of an agent to be a non-eliminatable subject is equivalent to its being the subject of a predicate.<sup>22</sup> What is a responsibility ascription? A responsibility ascription, says French, is an assertion of a conjunctive proposition with two specific conjuncts.<sup>23</sup> The first specific conjunct identifies the subject's actions *with* or *as* the cause of an event. The second conjunct requires that the direct result of an intentional act should be *intended* by the subject.<sup>24</sup> Together, if both conjuncts are joined together and asserted as a statement, the requirements for the formation of a responsibility ascription are met. If the responsibility ascription is applied to a non-eliminatable subject, then the referent of the proper name of the non-eliminatable subject is a moral agent. The construction firm Structure Tone, for example, can be considered a moral agent. The firm artificially inflated customer purchase orders without grounds for doing so *after* the firm won bids issued from customers to complete construction projects. The firm intended to defraud its customers for the purposes of increasing their financial gains from construction projects. Ultimately, the firm and not its employees won the bids, retroactively inflated the price of the construction, and defrauded consumers.<sup>25</sup> In this particular example, a responsibility ascription could be asserted: Structure Tone was the cause of an operation to defraud customers *and* Structure Tone intended to artificially inflate prices after winning a bid. Since both conjuncts of the conjunctive proposition are true, the responsibility ascription can be applied; if either of the conjunctive positions had been false, the responsibility ascription could not have been applied. Within this example, Structure Tone is a non-eliminatable subject because of its corporate internal decision (CID) structure: The corporation's executive leadership team followed internal protocol to arrive at their decision.<sup>26</sup> The referent of Structure Tone is the company founded in 1971 that operates under the same name that carries out construction projects.<sup>27</sup>

This section provides a brief explanation of Virginia Held's conception of moral agency. An agent is responsible for an action, says Held, under two conditions. First, an individual must be aware of their action such that they are not undertaking one action in the belief that they are undertaking a separate action; an individual must also know

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<sup>21</sup> French, Peter A. "The corporation as a moral person." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (1979): 210.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Bagli, Charles V., "Building Firm Pleads Guilty to Defrauding Its Customers." *The New York Times*, April 30, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

the moral value of the *foreseeable* consequences of their action.<sup>28</sup> For example, if Max murders Jake and is not under pretenses that he is doing anything else besides murdering Jake, Max is aware of his actions. If Max murders Jake under the impression that Jake is a mannequin placed on a movie set, Max is not aware of his actions. If Max is to be a moral agent in the first example, he must also know the moral value of his actions or the particular value that *could* be associated with his actions. This first condition can be described as Held's reference to the *epistemic condition* of moral agency. Second, an individual must undertake an action whilst having the ability to have completed a separate action.<sup>29</sup> For example, if Max is to be a blameworthy moral agent for the murder of Jake, it must also be the case that Max could have acted differently: It would need to be true that Max could have refrained from murdering Jake. If Max hits Jake with his car in the midst of an epileptic seizure, Max would not have been able to refrain from murdering Jake. If, however, Max murders Jake and could have refrained from doing so, Max would meet the second requirement for moral agency. This second can be described as Held's reference to the *freedom condition* of moral agency.<sup>30</sup>

While the freedom condition seems to be implicit in both of the prior requirements of moral responsibility, is it possible to dissociate freedom from responsibility? John Fischer concedes that responsibility can be dissociated from control, but he argues that this dissociation does not entail the consistency of determinism and responsibility.<sup>31</sup> If responsibility is associated with freedom, agents acting freely are responsible for their actions; however, if responsibility is not associated with freedom, then there may be conditions under which individuals lack responsibility for their actions. For example, Fischer attributes the *principle of alternate possibilities* to Harry Frankfurt, which holds that a person is morally responsible for his actions if he could have acted differently.<sup>32</sup> If it is the case that individuals are bound by causal determinism, this poses a significant problem for moral agency. If the ability to have acted differently is a necessary condition for an agent to be a moral agent, causal determinism entails that the agent could not have acted differently and could not be a moral agent. It might be the case that determinism is consistent with responsibility: Even if someone could not have acted otherwise, they *could* still be morally responsible for their actions. Fischer considers a thought experiment where a neurosurgeon inserts a device into a patient's brain making it possible for the neurosurgeon to control the actions of the patient.<sup>33</sup> Suppose, says Fischer, that it is inevitable that the patient will vote for Reagan and that the neurosurgeon *could* but *does not* intervene in the patient's voting decision. The condition under which the neurosurgeon *would* intervene is when the patient is prepared to vote for Carter (which the patient would not do).<sup>34</sup> In this case, even in a world of causal determinism, there are instances when the actions of an

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<sup>28</sup> Held, Virginia. "Can a random collection of individuals be morally responsible?." *The Journal of Philosophy* 67, no. 14 (1970): 471-481.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Fischer, John Martin. "Responsibility and control." *The Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 1 (1982): 24-40.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

individual could reasonably be their own; therefore, an agent *could* be morally responsible for some of their actions even if the counterfactual of an action would have been impossible. In conclusion, Fischer affirms the capability to separate responsibility from freedom whilst also providing a counterexample to the claim that determinism and responsibility are necessarily consistent. To close, a lively discussion persists about the necessary and sufficient conditions of moral responsibility.

## V. COLLECTIVITIES AND NATIONS

This section first contradistinguishes aggregate collectivities from conglomerate collectivities; after having done this, nations are categorized as conglomerate collectivities. An aggregate collectivity is a group where the sum of the individual identities of the group are such that a change to one individual identity changes the group's collective identity. For example, the group *white Americans* can be classified as an aggregate collectivity.<sup>35</sup> Each moment that a white American is born or dies, it is the case that the aggregate group 'white Americans' is different. In short, the group white Americans share the common feature of being members of the white race; however, the set of all white Americans frequently changes. As a consequence, there is spatial contiguity and temporal contiguity of collective membership: Membership is sensitive to space and time.<sup>36</sup> As a result, members are not always capable of intentional agency. There is no easy coordination system for white Americans because the identity of the group is the sum of all of its members identities. A conglomerate collectivity is a group where a change in membership does not change the identity of the group. Suppose I seek medical care at the Fair Hope Hospital and am harmed due to medical malpractice on the part of a staff member at the Fair Hope Hospital.<sup>37</sup> If the staff member is fired or resigns from the Fair Hope Hospital, the identity of the hospital does not change. As a result, conglomerate collectivities such as teams, corporations, and other groups are robust against a change in membership. Of particular note, the actions of a conglomerate collectivity are not reducible to the individuals associated within the group. A conglomerate collectivity possesses an internal command structure for decision making: In the case of corporations, this may be referred to the corporate internal decision structure (CID structure).<sup>38</sup> When a corporation issues shares of public stock, the corporation follows the CID. There is no such structure for decision making from random collectives like white Americans. The CID remains consistent across changes in the membership of the conglomerate. If all of the employees of a corporation are replaced by new employees, the corporation's identity remains the same.

While this paper has presented two types of groups, aggregate collectivities and conglomerate collectivities, it is necessary to defend why nations ought to be categorized as a type of conglomerate collectivity. First, nations have well-defined

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<sup>35</sup> French, Peter A. "Collective responsibility and the practice of medicine." *The Journal of medicine and philosophy* 7, no. 1 (1982): 65-86.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

protocol for making decisions and there are channels of communication such that decisions can be made or not made as a collective. For the purposes of this paper, this process can be referred to as the national internal decision structure (NID structure). If the U.S. decides to create a constitutional amendment, the nation follows a clear process for doing so. When the U.S. dropped a nuclear bomb on the City of Nagasaki, the decision making process followed a clear causal chain.<sup>39</sup> When Nazi Germany committed atrocities, a clear NID structure existed.<sup>40</sup> Second, a nation is not reducible. Even if an act of genocide killed all people from the State of Wyoming, would the identity of the United States have changed? If a war resulted in the death of (the set of all) elected officials in the U.S., would 'U.S.' refer to something different than it does now? Does the birth of each newborn baby in the U.S. impact the identity of the group referred to as the 'U.S.'? Do changes in the person serving as President of the U.S. impact the identity of the group referred to as the 'U.S.'? The answer to each of these questions appears to be a resounding "no." This answer confirms that the identity of nations is not dependent upon the sum of the identities of individual members; rather, nations are conglomerate collectives whose identity is independent from the sum total of all member identities. By way of a brief note, if a nation 'Nazi Germany' or 'U.S.' follow a NID structure, in what sense can one government official be solely responsible for the actions of a particular nation? Noam Chomsky attributes to Radhabinod Pal, a judge at the Tokyo tribunal, the view that former U.S. president Harry Truman's conduct during World War II was comparable to the crimes of some Nazi leaders who were hung following the Nuremberg trials.<sup>41</sup> According to Chomsky, most U.S. presidents, by their conduct as the commander-in-chief, violated international laws and committed war crimes.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, while U.S. presidents may have been key members in the NID structure, they were not the *only* members. Federal legislators funded military invasions, troops deployed nuclear bombs, and millions of ordinary U.S. adults voted for Truman. Karl Jaspers takes up a similar question: In what sense are Germans responsible for the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany? Jaspers claims that Germans possessed 'political guilt,' for they choose how they are governed.<sup>43</sup> When Hitler eventually rose to power, he received significant support. Harry Truman held the title 'Vice-President of the United States' because he received the most electoral votes of anyone running for the position; in 1945, 85% of Americans approved of the use of atomic bombs on Japanese cities.<sup>44</sup> While Truman may have been involved in the U.S. NID structure, *he* did not attack Japan.<sup>45</sup> In the same way, individual players on soccer teams kick soccer balls into nets, but only *teams* earn points. In a soccer match, *players* do not win the match, a *team* wins the match. In war, *presidents* do not wage wars, *sovereign states* wage wars. While individuals may undertake particular actions, groups

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<sup>39</sup> Takaki, Ronald T. *Hiroshima: Why America dropped the atomic bomb*. Little, Brown, and Company, 1995.

<sup>40</sup> Gerth, Hans. "The Nazi Party: its leadership and composition." *American Journal of Sociology* 45, no. 4 (1940): 517-541.

<sup>41</sup> Chomsky, Noam. "If the Nuremberg Laws Were Applied." *Chomsky.info*, Lecture delivered around (1990).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Jaspers, Karl. *The question of German guilt*. Fordham Univ Press, 2009.

<sup>44</sup> U.S. Department of Energy, "The Manhattan Project: Informing the Public, August 1945." *OSTI.gov*, Accessed February 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Kort, Michael. *The Columbia guide to Hiroshima and the bomb*. Columbia University Press, 2007.

can coordinate specific actions as well. A nation can collect taxes, pay reparations, and wage wars. Individuals may contribute in varying degrees to the NID structure. In conclusion, a nation is similar to a corporation because both have a clear decision-making process, both are composed of individuals, and both undertake actions as a collective; consequently, a nation ought to be categorized as a conglomerate collectivity and not as an aggregate collectivity.

## VI. THE MORAL AGENCY OF NATIONS

So far, this paper noted extreme poverty poses and will continue to pose a significant humanitarian challenge unless groups increase their financial contributions to efforts that, consistent with reason and science, do the most amount of good. Next, parallels were drawn between the arguments made by effective altruists in support of individual responsibility for the suffering and death of those in extreme poverty and my thesis. Following this, two notable conceptions of moral agency and a challenge faced by most theories of moral agency were presented. In the last section, conglomerate and aggregate collectives were introduced as two dominant *types* of groups and nations were categorized as conglomerate collectives. This section applies the accounts of moral agency offered by French and Held to nations. In doing so, this paper offers the first positive account of how nations satisfy necessary and sufficient conditions required to be moral agents. If this section is correct, it follows that high-income countries have a moral obligation to increase their humanitarian aid contributions just as Singer argues that those living in affluent societies possess an individual moral obligation. There are a range of actions that nations take that extend beyond humanitarian aid: some of these actions have already been discussed (i.e. waging war, collecting taxes, paying reparations).

Recall French's account of moral agency: 'moral person' describes the *referent* of any proper name or description that can be a non-eliminatable subject of responsibility ascription<sup>46</sup> The first conjunct of a responsibility ascription identifies the subject's actions with or as the cause of an event.<sup>47</sup> Can nations be identified with or as the cause of an event? The answer is a resounding "yes." For example, the U.S. dropped an atomic bomb on Japan (more precisely on the City of Hiroshima). More than 70,000 men, women, and children were instantly killed in the event.<sup>48</sup> The second conjunct of a responsibility ascription is that actions are intended by the subject or the direct result of an intentional act of the subject.<sup>49</sup> Is it the case that the U.S. decision to drop an atomic bomb was an intentional act? Again, the answer is a resounding "yes." While there exists significant evidence to prove that concerns about ethics and the law were advanced through the NID structure, the U.S. ultimately decided to move forward with the bombing of Hiroshima. It is even clearer that the deployment of an atomic bomb on

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<sup>46</sup> French, Peter A. "Collective responsibility and the practice of medicine." *The Journal of medicine and philosophy* 7, no. 1 (1982): 65-86.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

tens of thousands of civilians was not *accidental*. Per the Quebec Agreement, records demonstrate that diplomats from Canada and the United Kingdom concurred with decisions to drop an atomic bomb on Japan.<sup>50 51</sup> Together, the responsibility ascription is that the actions of the U.S. caused the instant death of more than 70,000 Japanese civilians (through the deployment of an atomic bomb) *and* the U.S. murdered these civilians intentionally. This responsibility ascription applies to the referent of the proper name 'U.S.' Similar to the notion of the corporate veil, it is possible to posit a national veil such that the referent of the proper name 'U.S.' is the Federal Government of the United States.<sup>52</sup> In this way, it is possible to separate the identity of a nation from the identity of all of its residents: This is, in fact, what makes a conglomerate collective different from an aggregate collective.<sup>53</sup>

Next, nations will be scrutinized by Held's account of moral agency. Held's first necessary condition of moral agents is that moral agents must know the action that they are taking and the moral value of that action.<sup>54</sup> The U.S. had agency to legally end the practice of slavery within its jurisdiction. This took the form of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.<sup>55</sup> Were there discussions regarding the morality of slavery before slavery was made constitutional? Arguments offered by abolitionists and Lincoln frequently mentioned that slavery was inconsistent with moral standards.<sup>56</sup> Beyond slavery, the U.S. has a long track-record of recognizing the moral value of its actions. In his inaugural address, George Washington states that an understanding of moral value is a source and constant of popular government.<sup>57</sup> The U.S. Federal Register has a myriad of references to the moral obligations of the U.S. and its federal agencies. For example, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has recognized its legal and moral obligation to clean up polluted air in municipalities.<sup>58</sup> The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs acknowledges its moral obligation to veterans and their families as one of its core values.<sup>59</sup> Held's second necessary condition of moral agents is that moral agents have the freedom to act. Does the U.S. have the freedom to take a particular action and refrain from taking a particular action? The U.S. adopted the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment as part of the U.S. Constitution, but it could have acted differently. The U.S. House of Representatives might not have passed the legislation, the U.S. Senate might not have passed the legislation, and the President of the United States could have

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<sup>50</sup> Hewlett, Richard G., and Oscar E. Anderson. *A History of the United States Atomic Energy Commission*. Vol. 1. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1962.

<sup>51</sup> U.S. State Department, "Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, the Conference of Berlin (the Potsdam Conference), 1945, Volume I: No 619 Minutes of a Meeting of the Combined Policy Committee." *History. State.gov*, July 4, 1945.

<sup>52</sup> Macey, Jonathan, and Joshua Mitts. "Finding order in the morass: The three real justifications for piercing the corporate veil." *Cornell L. Rev.* 100 (2014): 99.

<sup>53</sup> French, Peter A. "Collective responsibility and the practice of medicine." *The Journal of medicine and philosophy* 7, no. 1 (1982): 65-86.

<sup>54</sup> Held, Virginia. "Can a random collection of individuals be morally responsible?" *The Journal of Philosophy* 67, no. 14 (1970): 471-481.

<sup>55</sup> U.S. Constitution. amend. XIII, sec. 1-2.

<sup>56</sup> Zarefsky, David. *Lincoln, Douglas, and slavery: In the crucible of public debate*. University of Chicago Press, 1993.

<sup>57</sup> Washington, George. "First inaugural address." The Avalon Project at Yale Law School, [On-line].

<sup>58</sup> Environmental Protection Agency, "Air Plan Approval; AK, Fairbanks North Stark Borough; 2006 PM 2.5. *Federalregister.gov*" October 10, 2017. 82 FR 42457.

<sup>59</sup> Veterans Affairs Department, "Core Values, Characteristics, and Customer Experience Principles of the Department." *Federalregister.gov*, May 5, 2019. 84 FR 22709.

vetoed the legislation. To underscore this point, if nations lack the capacity to act different, it is only because people lack the capacity to act differently. If people lack the capacity to act differently, people must also be excluded from the set of all moral agents. As a result, Held's second condition of moral agency also applies to nations: Nations can increase financial contributions to fight extreme poverty or they can decide not to increase financial contributions to fight extreme poverty. While this section has tested the claim that nations may be morally responsible for their actions as moral agents, the next section will focus on key objections that are often levied against collective responsibility. After outlining these objections in detail, robust defenses against these objections will be provided.

## VII. OBJECTIONS TO THE MORAL AGENCY OF NATIONS

This section is concerned with outlining several objections that have been raised against collective responsibility and which, per the literature, could be applied against my central claim. By way of reiteration, my claim is that nations are moral agents and, therefore, bear moral responsibility for what they do and what they fail to do; in particular, high-income nations are morally responsible for saving the lives of those living in extreme poverty and ought to, through the use of science and reason, make increased and sustained financial contributions to this end. First, an objection from Lon Fuller argues that the moral agency of groups is "fiction theory" because groups derive their identity from foundational documents; without these documents, it is claimed that a group cannot exist.<sup>60</sup> Second, Max Weber and J.N. Watkins advance the claim of methodological individualism, which argues that all groups are reducible whereas individuals are not reducible.<sup>61</sup> Third, Joel Feinberg argues that the notion of holding a type of group responsible would entail holding each of its members responsible.<sup>62</sup> Fourth, Jan Narveson argues that it is wrong to punish the least powerful members of a nation for the alleged crimes of the most powerful members of a nation; he also argues that most citizens of countries do not choose to be members of *any* country.<sup>63</sup> Fifth, Iris Marion Young argues that groups have responsibilities to stop trading with countries that permit corporations to violate human rights; I will discuss how my position in this paper does not commit me to endorse trade sanctions on countries who permit corporations to utilize sweatshop labor.<sup>64</sup> Sixth, countless objections are raised against any distribution of foreign aid, so I will provide a response to those skeptical of government funds being distributed especially in the form of humanitarian assistance to those living in extreme poverty.

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<sup>60</sup> Fuller, Lon L. "American legal realism." *University of Pennsylvania Law Review and American Law Register* 82, no. 5 (1934): 429-462.

<sup>61</sup> Weber, Max. "Economy and society (Vol. 1). Berkeley." CA: University of California (1978).

<sup>62</sup> Feinberg, Joel. "Collective responsibility." *The Journal of Philosophy* 65, no. 21 (1968): 674-688.

<sup>63</sup> Narveson, Jan. "Collective responsibility." *The Journal of Ethics* 6, no. 2 (2002): 179-198.

<sup>64</sup> Young, Iris Marion. "Responsibility and global labor justice." In *Responsibility in context*, pp. 53-76. Springer, Dordrecht, 2010.

According to Lon Fuller, social groups (i.e. corporations, nations, *et cetera*) exist only as creations of the law and imagination.<sup>65</sup> Without a set of foundational documents, no group can exist; therefore, social groups are one step removed from personhood and are not real in any sense. On the view of Fuller, persons who are employees of a corporation (or members of a nation), form a *unit* in the same way that different hams hanging in a butcher shop could be referred to as a *unit*.<sup>66</sup> Still further, Fuller's central claim is that everyone knows that corporations and other groups, considered by law to have personhood, are really "fictions" used by legal writers and judges without justification: When the law refers to corporations as persons, says Fuller, everyone knows that the attribution of personhood to anything other than an individual person is a false statement.<sup>67</sup> For example, Fuller would likely find fault with the following sentence: The U.S. rescued five hostages from a Syria. Still further, Fuller would claim that 'U.S.' is an empty term because its referent is ambiguous. By way of an extension, says Fuller, determining whether or not a legal fiction is good or bad is dependent upon the consequences of treating a legal fiction as a legal person.<sup>68</sup> Larry May concedes that even if Fuller is right in claiming that it is a fiction to state that the Gulf Oil Company left Pittsburgh because only people are said to act; in order for the Gulf Oil Company to leave Pittsburgh individuals, acting as designated representatives through a CID structure, do make the decisions to leave.<sup>69</sup> On the view of May, it is warranted to use the fictions phrase "Gulf Oil Company left Pittsburgh" because of the CID structure that gives a fiction agency. In a similar way, when the U.S. rescues hostages from Syria, it acts through an NID structure that provides the requisite agency for action. It would be appropriate to use the fiction "U.S." because the referent is a conglomerate collective capable of agency. Unlike May, this paper argues that the requirement of foundational documents to the establishment of a country has no meaningful impact on the ability of a nation to exist outside of laws. Atoms from two separate elements can be held together through various types of bonds to become compounds. Without elements, compounds do not exist; however, both actually exist. Both elements and compounds have a variety of properties based on their composition: They are made up of atoms, they have constant compositions, *et cetera*. While people are required to establish a country since countries do not emerge spontaneously) persons and countries can share a variety of properties. How an entity emerges is a property, but it is not the only or most important property. Thus, this paper contends that whether a nation can exist outside of its foundational documents is secondary to whether a nation possesses agency: A nation possesses agency through its NID structure and can undertake a range of actions in the same way as a corporation.

One of the most notable challenges to the ability for even *some* groups to possess moral responsibility is the concept of methodological individualism. Some

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<sup>65</sup> Fuller, Lon Luvois. "Legal fictions." Ill. L. Rev. 25 (1930): 363.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> May, Larry. The morality of groups: Collective responsibility, group-based harm, and corporate rights. University of Notre Dame Press, 1987: 10.

methodological individualists like H.D. Lewis dismiss the notion of collective responsibility and the idea that groups can be persons as “barbaric.”<sup>70</sup> The view of most proponents of methodological individualism is summarized well by J.W.N. Watkins who defines it as the view that social processes and events ought to come from principles affecting the behavior of *individuals* and descriptions of their situations.<sup>71</sup> According to Watkins, social events are *always* reducible to the actions of individuals and, therefore, what seems to be collective behavior is really individual behavior.<sup>72</sup> Max Weber endorses this view; he also claims that collective actions undertaken by states and nations are reducible to social actions taken by individuals. However, Weber concedes that for practical purposes and legal purposes it may be appropriate to treat states as persons.<sup>73</sup> There are some actions, however, that are not reducible to persons. While it might be the case that persons carry out roles within an NID structure, there are *some* actions that people may not take. While dictators may be the individuals who sign a declaration of war, they do so as representatives of a particular country. Similarly, a person cannot *pass* legislation in Congress: It is possible to trace successful legislation in Congress to individual persons, but the act is undertaken by the group and not individuals who merely *vote* on legislation. Broadly, some actions are undertaken only by groups: Even advocates of methodological individualism do not assert that a *player* won a soccer game; rather, a player might have been a member of a winning *team*. If it is accepted that there are some actions that can be undertaken by only groups, it may be accepted that groups can undertake actions that individuals may also undertake as well as those that individuals may not undertake.

Joel Feinberg’s objections to collective responsibility are specifically relevant to the notion of shared responsibility, which is defined at the outset of this paper and contradistinguished from collective responsibility. The principal argument raised by Feinberg centers around his concern of how members of a group might be held responsible for other group members’ actions. For example, Feinberg presents a situation where a man is swimming off a public beach without a lifeguard on duty; nevertheless, there are 1,000 accomplished swimmers on the beach. The man begins to drown, none of the swimmers responds, and the man dies by suffocation.<sup>74</sup> Would some or all of the accomplished swimmers on the beach bear responsibility for the man’s death? Feinberg considers it to be a ridiculous proposition that all 1,000 accomplished swimmers could be responsible for the man’s death.<sup>75</sup> This paper does not need to disagree with Feinberg because his objection is directed at an aggregate group and not a conglomerate group. Swimmers on the beach would not bear responsibility as a group because the aggregate collective lacked a clear decision making process; consequently, the example would not apply to nations, which are categorized as conglomerate collectives. Feinberg’s second example is that it would

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<sup>70</sup> Lewis, Hywel D. "Collective responsibility." *Philosophy* 23, no. 84 (1948): 3-18.

<sup>71</sup> Watkins, John W.N. "Methodological individualism: a reply." *Philosophy of science* 22, no. 1 (1955): 58-62.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Weber, Max. "Economy and society (Vol. 1). Berkeley." CA: University of California (1978): 90.

<sup>74</sup> Feinberg, Joel. "Collective responsibility." *The Journal of Philosophy* 65, no. 21 (1968): 674-688.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

seem strange to hold Southern Whites collectively responsible for the post-Civil War Southern social system.<sup>76</sup> Again, 'Southern Whites' references an aggregate group who do not possess a clear decision-making process; while it is possible to reduce an aggregate group to its members (since the identity of the group is the sum of individuals), it is not possible to reduce a conglomerate group. In both of Feinberg's examples, he describes an aggregate group and notes that holding all of the members of these groups responsible for the actions of *some* members seems impractical and even unfair. On both counts, I agree with Feinberg. I can agree with Feinberg without conceding ground on my central claim because nations are conglomerate groups and are not reducible to their individual members. In the case of conglomerate collectives, it is possible to think of a *national veil* that protects individual members from moral responsibility born by the group. In some cases, individuals within the NID structure and the nation itself might both bear moral responsibility for a set of actions. In the common law system, two or more persons can possess the same liability for neglecting their relevant obligations. This is referred to as joint and several liability. In some cases, it is possible that nations *and* members of nations might be both responsible for neglecting a particular responsibility. In the same way, we might hold two lifeguards as well as the company that they work for legally and morally blameworthy for watching a man drown in the ocean and failing to save his life.

Jan Narveson notes that there are harmful actions that would not have occurred without the existence of particular groups, but he is concerned with the idea of shared responsibility within nations. Are, asks Narveson, Nazi front-line soldiers and cooks responsible for following directives of their leaders?<sup>77</sup> Narveson answers this question in the negative and points to the way in which the Nuremberg trials were conducted as an affirmation of his position.<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, just because the Nuremberg trials focused on Nazi leaders did not mean that this was the right thing to do; the Nuremberg trials also excluded Allied leaders of World War II (largely because the Allied powers were running the trials). Nevertheless, believing that nations can possess moral agency and, therefore, be responsible for their actions does not entail that *all* members are *always* responsible for every action undertaken by the state. Narveson is right to note that if *some* Nazi cooks and the front-line soldiers decided to rebel against Nazi leadership, they would be killed on the spot.<sup>79</sup> Reparations were not imposed on every German for the actions of every German for their complicity in allowing Hitler's power to remain unchecked; rather, reparations were imposed on Germany *as a nation*. The way that Germany raised funds to pay for their reparations required collecting funds from individual members through the NID structure; however, Germany and not its individual members bore responsibility for paying reparations.<sup>80</sup> Nations possess a capability to collect taxes to fund objectives of the nation just as corporations possess a capability to issue shares of public stock to fund objectives of the corporation. This

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Narveson, Jan. "Collective responsibility." *The Journal of Ethics* 6, no. 2 (2002): 179-198.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

might entail raising revenue to reduce extreme poverty in developing countries or to pay reparations. Finally, Narveson notes that members of nations do not get to choose the countries where they are born.<sup>81</sup> Despite national differences related to procedures of immigration and emigration, millions of people around the world are trying to flee from their own country. Since this is the case, says Narveson, it would be wrong to hold *all* members of a nation responsible for the actions of their nation. Ultimately, Narveson is concerned with the idea that all members of a nation *could* be responsible for the actions of the nation. It is not my position that there are actions where all members of nation could be responsible for the actions of the nation. This is because a nation is a conglomerate collective that makes decisions through an NID structure and, therefore, the nation itself is responsible for actions undertaken as a result of the NID structure.

Some may be concerned that viewing nations as moral agents might lead some nations to change their behavior in drastic ways. On some college campuses, students and faculty believe that an individual *college* has a responsibility to refrain from procuring their apparel from foreign multinational corporations who work in conditions similar to those experienced by workers during the first Industrial Revolution. As Iris Marion Young notes, some believe that groups (i.e. universities and even nations) have a responsibility to prevent injustices faced by sweatshop laborers in developing countries.<sup>82</sup> Young claims that, in the absence of countries that prevent multinational corporations from fostering fair labor standards, various agents and groups have obligations to prevent *future* harms to individuals by reducing their consumption from some multinational corporations.<sup>83</sup> Does this mean that the U.S. should establish trade sanctions on countries without fair labor standards? Nothing in this paper requires the U.S. to act in this manner: Ultimately, the U.S. ought to follow the NID structure for arriving at its decision. The decision to impose trade sanctions on countries without fair labor standards could lead to the loss of jobs for millions of those working in sweatshops. Some laborers who work in sweatshops can earn three to seven times the national average and most earn wages above the average national wage.<sup>84</sup> Reducing demand for the goods produced by these laborers, through the imposition of trade sanctions, could lead foreign multinational corporation to fire employees.<sup>85</sup> If nations are morally responsible for what they do and what they fail to do, they are capable of considering the moral value of the anticipated consequences of their actions. Through the application of standard economic reasoning, most nations understand that despite poor working conditions the imposition of trade barriers on countries without fair labor standards would likely have deleterious consequences on the laborers for whom sanctions sought to help. If nations are to be considered moral agents, they are responsible for the foreseeable consequences of their actions. In some cases, the best way to improve human rights might entail refraining from the imposition of trade sanctions.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Young, Iris Marion. "Responsibility and global labor justice." In *Responsibility in context*, pp. 53-76. Springer, Dordrecht, 2010.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

Finally, some people may be concerned with nations being morally responsible for increasing their contributions of humanitarian aid. Some may claim that the duty of the U.S. is to its own residents and not residents of developing countries who live in extreme poverty. This might be the case; however, since the U.S. is a moral agent capable of saving millions of lives in a cost-effective manner, it ought to save as many lives as it can. Suppose someone living in extreme poverty traveled to the U.S. seeking permanent residence without obtaining the appropriate approval and is hit by a car. Should the U.S. refrain from permitting the undocumented resident to access emergency room services because the resident is not a U.S. citizen? I think the U.S. has a moral obligation to save the life of an undocumented resident. Is there any morally relevant distinction between saving the undocumented residents who escape extreme poverty to live in the U.S. and those who are unable to escape? I do not believe there is any morally relevant difference. Ultimately, high-income nations face a trade-off in the distribution of public funds. Whereas ORT is a cost-effective way to save a human life for under \$20, the U.S. could decide to build a border wall or purchase another F-35 joint strike fighter. In both cases, the comparable moral significance of a human life is not overshadowed.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

This paper advanced an argument to claim that high-income nations possess a moral obligation to increase their charitable contributions to those dying of preventable diseases around the world. At the outset, suffering and death of “normal” and healthy human beings, from lack of food, shelter, and medical care is bad. If a high-income country can prevent death and suffering without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, the high-income country ought, morally, to do it. Geographical distance and international relations between any two given countries is morally irrelevant. There is no morally relevant distinction between cases in which a high-income country can act unilaterally and in which the high-income country can act multilaterally. Some collectives, specifically nations, possess necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for moral responsibility. Shared responsibility should and can be contradistinguished from collective responsibility. Aggregate collectives should and can be distinguished from conglomerate collectivities. Standard objections raised by Lon Fuller, Max Weber, Joel Feinberg, and Jan Narveson fail to undermine the claims advanced in this paper.

If people and nations can be moral agents, people and nations are both capable of being evaluated for the moral implications of actions that they take. If we believe that people ought to give more to humanitarian causes, it is clear that nations ought to give more as well. Presently, high-income countries are not giving enough to aid organizations that reduce global poverty or reduce deaths due to preventable diseases. Countless lives could be saved if nations view the alleviation of extreme poverty as an obligation. Nevertheless, the novel argument advanced in this paper could set the foundation for others to investigate the moral responsibilities that nations may share. It

is likely the case that there are far fewer obligations of nations than individuals; nevertheless, nations are capable of accomplishing collective actions that the wealthiest and most altruistic individuals are incapable of accomplishing on their own.

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