

## **Disarmament and the Solution to World Poverty**

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Philosophers have proposed methods for eliminating global poverty that involve either various forms of redistribution of wealth or justice, or the construction of institutions which would enable the impoverished to pull themselves out of their hapless situation. Some methods are based on moral arguments and utilize consequentialist systems, such as the explicit redistribution of wealth from relatively rich individuals to poorer ones through charitable acts [Singer 1999]. Others focus on institution building or economic stimuli, sometimes directed at particular religious, ethnic or otherwise defined groups [Risse 2005, Nussbaum 2004]. More radical approaches consider whether doing nothing at all might be the best course of action [Moyo 2009]. Critics of these proposals cite problems of feasibility, paternalism, sovereignty and economics when evaluating their merit.

In this essay I propose a method for the elimination of global poverty that is strong for three reasons: first, it appeals to moral arguments which are founded upon both positive and negative duties, second, it describes a realistic global economic policy which can be defended by appealing to common sense, and third, it agrees with teleological arguments for the inevitability of a world state. My method is based on a single assertion: that the global trade in weapons and the taking of profits from the sales of arms is unsupportable from any point of view, and that the path towards global prosperity can only be paved once the global economy releases itself from the grip of individual profiteering from arms trading and moves towards a system which rewards only real economic growth. To make my argument I will first present an analogical situation that clarifies the salient points and demonstrates the fundamental problem, and then present evidence from the real world that supports my normative claims for institutional reform. To conclude I will evaluate to what extent the ideas of Singer, Pogge, Rawls and Wendt support my claim.

Suppose that you, A, have two acquaintances, x and y, who are in conflict with each other. How you approach the situation depends of course upon your own relationship with them: if they are your friends it would be both in your own interest and

morally supportable, hence reasonable, to mediate in order to resolve the conflict. But what might we consider reasonable if your attitude towards x and y is ambiguous, or contemptuous? In such a case you might look for ways to profit from the conflict, for example by selling a handgun to x so that he would gain the upper hand over y. While doing so could not be defended morally, you might be able to argue your actions from an economic standpoint: you would profit from the sale, and since you have no other vested interest in either party it makes no difference to you if x uses your weapon to kill y.

Once you have taken the economic stance in this situation, you might want to examine the case further to see how profitability could be maximized. Suppose x successfully uses the handgun: then the sudden absence of y implies that you can no longer profit from the situation. Would it not be reasonable then to sell weapons to both x and y, thereby equalizing and intensifying the situation such that neither side could act to bring it to a quick end? As long as they remain in conflict, you could gradually increase the firepower equally, ensuring future arms sales and profits. Once again, such action I think would be considered morally abhorrent by anyone, but one cannot deny the economic attractiveness.

There is an obvious factor missing from this story: what is preventing x or y from using their weapons against you, the seller? Or perhaps they strike a secret truce, and decide to combine forces and use their newly purchased weaponry to defeat you? The answer is obvious: you maintain your own stockpile of arms, such that you ensure superior firepower at all times. This might seem to be a problem for what up to now appears to be a lucrative economic arrangement: is it not self-defeating to have to invest in new armaments to defend yourself against your own weapons, which you have placed in the hands of these new potential enemies? Not at all, since you can always include the cost of developing your own weapons in the price at which you sell weapons to x and y. Remember, this arrangement has nothing to do with the realities of market economy. Pricing is arbitrary. Even if person B would arrive on the scene as a competitor, the situation remains lucrative for the sellers as the demand for more firepower can only increase over time. Nothing ages faster than the new, and this is especially the case for weapons.

And whether or not x and y ever use the weapons is irrelevant. If the weapons are

not used, they are economically useless for the owners, taking up storage space and costing maintenance and security. If the weapons are used, the only possible outcome is damage that must be rebuilt, meaning a waste of resources. Either way, no actual wealth has been generated, only profits for you, the seller of weapons. Real, material wealth has been transferred from both x and y to A, and will continue to do so until such wealth has been completely exhausted. No growth has taken place – no development, evolution, building, culture, or positive endeavour of any kind. Only the taking of profits and the useless expenditure of creative and technological efforts in producing a supposed capital good which in fact has no relationship whatsoever to real economic growth.

I contend that my analogy differs very little from the current global arms trade. Take for example the market that arose from the arming of militias and the distribution of landmines during Angola's civil war between 1993-2002. Businessmen Arkady Gaydamak and Pierre Falcone were involved in the arms trade with Angola, buying tanks, helicopters and artillery pieces and then selling them to Angola through a French-based firm and its subsidiary in Eastern Europe.<sup>1</sup> The deals were worth \$790 million, an outrageous amount considering that the GDI in Angola is \$3,450.<sup>2</sup> Gaydamak and Falcone took in astronomical profits, and many others linked to these deals also became millionaires overnight. Prominent figures from French politics were involved in the case, including Jean-Christophe Mitterrand and Charles Pasqua, who were convicted of accepting bribes to facilitate the arms deals.

Angola still wallows in poverty, in spite of it currently being Africa's second largest oil exporter (in 2004 production was at 1 million barrels per day). And though it is a country rich in natural resources, including oil, coffee and timber, life expectancy is well below that of wealthier western nations (in 2008, men: 45, women: 49). Marburg, Ebola and Cholera epidemics still claim lives. We in the West talk of ways to help Angola and other impoverished African countries rebuild their nations after the ravages of war. But had the soldiers of Angola possessed only the simplest of homemade

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<sup>1</sup> BBC news, 27 October 2009: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8328314.stm> (accessed 14 November 2009)

<sup>2</sup> Geopolitical information on Angola from BBC news: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country\\_profiles/1063073.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country_profiles/1063073.stm) (accessed 14 November 2009)

weapons to fight the war it would have ended swiftly and with relatively few casualties.

The pursuit of excessive profits through arms trading is not only culpable for the depth of poverty created by this conflict, but the remnants thereof will long stand in the way to recovery. Three factors act to sustain Angolan poverty: the disproportional presence of arms in the civilian population which stands in the way of establishing lasting peace, a countryside littered with land mines which claim far more civilian casualties than military, and the burden of foreign debt which accumulated during the arms trade with external powers (including Cuba, the US and South Africa). Arguments that local government corruption is ultimately responsible for preventing economic recovery do not hold, since it were external governments who supplied the loans to buy the arms which kept these powers intact throughout the civil conflict. Would these corrupt authorities have been able to act at all if they were not well armed?

The situation between the two parties at conflict in Angola's civil war and the external powers which sold weapons with them demonstrates my point that trade situations involving arms are doomed to economic failure. What is the net economic benefit of the total system, including both  $x$  and  $y$  (Angola's internal forces) and  $A$  (the external parties)? There has been nothing more than a transfer of wealth from one geographic area to another. Angola will languish in poverty until their debts have been paid and the scars of civil war have healed. The outside forces will consume that wealth until it has run out and then search for a new conflict from which to profit. In other words, individual profits were made but in the end the total wealth of the system was reduced. And Angola is a single example in a string of such cases, such as the Iran and Iraq wars, various Latin American conflicts, and the uneasy simmering in the Korean peninsula.

So my concrete institutional proposition for tackling global poverty can be expressed succinctly: the establishment of a complete, global moratorium on the trade of weapons of any kind and a move towards the complete disarming of the world's inhabitants. This could be achieved through the combined efforts of establishing a global monopoly on the production and sale of weapons, and by setting up institutions whose purpose would be to rectify the current situation, for instance by trading real wealth for stockpiles of arms. How is this proposal compatible with those made by other

philosophers? Do their ideas support my own?

The clearest support for my proposal comes from Pogge's suggestion that we adopt the negative duty to not cause harm [Pogge 2004]. His thesis draws from the observations that the cause of world poverty is the accumulated effect of the historical process which provided some nations with economic advantages, and that the persistence of poverty is still being supported by global institutions [ibid. 262-5]. The central conclusion he makes is that we should reduce the harms we cause, and not take advantage of injustice at the expense of its victims [ibid. 278]. My proposal is in harmony with his suggestion that institutions should be created which prevent us from gaining or maintaining wealth by unjust means. However my proposal goes one step further, by demonstrating that the pursuit of profit from conflict is also economically unjustifiable when looked at from a rational perspective.

A slight modification to Singer's proposal is necessary to defend my position. Singer proposes a solution to world poverty that is essentially nothing more than a lament of the excesses of consumerism [Singer 1999]. But wouldn't an attack on wasteful consumerism, rather than on consumerism itself, have been a more effective argument? Consumerism can be the expression of cultural practice: what is a good meal in an expensive restaurant but a celebration of culture? It is not wasteful, but an exercise in the quality of life. The expression of culture, even lavish consumerist culture, can be beneficial to all people, as it stimulates growth and creativity. But the production and trade of arms has no cultural or economic benefit to the world at large, and only a tiny quantity of individuals benefit at the expense of the vast majority. Yet nation states and international organizations persist in this activity, treating arms as if it were a consumer good and not the necessary tool for a people's self-defense. If we transfer Singer's argument for curbing individual consumer excess to the excess of the international arms market my case becomes clear. Consider this: in 1984, France's total capital goods export for arms was 61.8 billion francs, while for civil goods it was 56.5 billion francs.<sup>3</sup> When more than half of a country's economic activity is in the production and sale of arms – an inherently wasteful and useless consumer good – we can only wonder at what good that activity could have produced were it applied to non-wasteful production and trade.

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<sup>3</sup> Figures are from Saul (1992), *Voltaire's Bastards*, p. 154

We can also find support for my argument by applying Rawls' second principle of justice (the "difference principle") to the situation. The difference principle allows for "social and economic inequalities to be arranged so that they are ... to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged" [Rawls 1999, 266]. Its claim is that society is to form an economic structure such that the least advantaged are better off than they would be in any other feasible economic situation [Freeman 2009]. It should be clear from my analogy that an economic policy which allows for the sale of arms to parties in conflict, and for which the seller has no interest therein other than monetary profit, cannot possibly fit into the system Rawls describes. Even Pogge's criticism of Rawls can be dismissed here: there is no need to ask what baseline needs to be used to show the global poor that they would be worse off in another state than the global current state [Pogge 2004, 273]. My arguments against the arms trade provide *prima facie* evidence that it could never provide any benefit for the least advantaged.

Wendt [2003] argues that a global monopoly on the legitimate use of organized violence—a world state—is inevitable. His argument is based on teleological explanations, which demonstrate that there is a tendency of systems to develop towards stable end-states. He shows how the current anarchy between nation states has created a situation in which military technology and conflict have become increasingly destructive, and argues that the only possible outcome of this highly instable situation is the creation of a world state. While my own proposal does not take into consideration any teleological necessity for this to happen, it does demonstrate that such a move would be both morally and economically reasonable to pursue.

What arguments could be made against the dismantling of the international arms trade? A popular claim during the Reagan-Thatcher years was the "trickle down effect," including the idea that products developed in the course of conflict will make their way to the civil community and provide real benefit for the general population. Closer scrutiny of this claim reveals that such an economic policy is in reality an exceptionally inefficient way to stimulate technological progress. As was demonstrated, the production and trade in arms only produces short-term profit for a tiny fraction of the population, and the overall effect can never be real economic growth.

What about the Cold War argument, which asserts that a balance of superpowers

will provide long-lasting peace, albeit a tenuous peace? To counter this argument we need only address two questions: first, what has the total cost of armed conflict globally been since the end of World War II? Evidence suggests that by all accounts the 20th century has been the bloodiest in history, with a large portion of the bloodspilling taking place in recent times.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, how much benefit to the population at large could our scientists have provided, had they worked on developing technologies that contributed to actual economic growth? A wasted generation of minds spent working on useless weapons, when they could have been searching for alternate clean energy sources, or products that provide real, tangible benefit to mankind.

Is my proposal feasible? Here the burden of proof is perhaps heaviest, as it must rely on a certain amount of future-gazing and optimistic hopefulness. However there are signs that the world is moving in the right direction. The success of the Ottawa Treaty, which prohibits the use, stockpiling, production and transfer of anti-personnel landmines, and provides institutional support for their destruction, demonstrates this. There are currently 156 states that have signed on to the treaty.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, several think tanks and action groups have been established in recent years and are currently thriving, such as SIPRI (the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), the Lentz Peace Research Laboratory, and [globalpeacebuilders.org](http://globalpeacebuilders.org).

As I've demonstrated, there are convincing arguments for both the necessity of, and rationality behind the elimination of the arms trade as a method to eliminate global poverty. Such action conforms to a positive duty to aid the global poor as well as a negative duty to not cause or profit from global injustice. It also appeals to common sense economic principles, which advocate the increase of total wealth over the taking of individual profit, and is supported by teleological arguments for the movement towards a single global state.

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<sup>4</sup> Between 1945 and 1989 there have been an estimated 13.3 million civilian deaths and 6.8 million military deaths across some 125 wars [Eckhardt 1989]

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.icbl.org/> (accessed 14 November 2009)

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