INTRODUCTION

While the poor have always been with us, and while hunger is a companion to poverty, our globalizing civilization is witnessing unprecedented disparities represented by excessive wealth and massive starvation. We know that half the world’s population (mostly Asians) are living on one or two dollars a day, while the middle classes of affluent nations enjoy standards of living that feature – and increasingly revolve around – orgiastic hedonism and consumerism, some of it at the expense of the poorest nations.

Globalization has bought much success to many. Among its fruits are instantaneous mobile data-exchange and allied information technologies, and the shrinkage of space–time via the Internet; the rapid movement of goods and services enabled by complex transportation and communication infrastructures; the transcendence of transnational economic forces over local and even national political constraints; the emancipation and increasing participation of women and members of minority groups across the spectrum of cultural arenas; and an emergent global elite whose members pledge allegiance to planetary management and proudly consider themselves (with some justification) to be ‘citizens of the world.’

But on the other side of the digital and global divide, in developing nations as well as in failed States, billions of human beings are caught in terrible poverty traps with little or no hope of extricating themselves, or their children, unaided. Ironically, many forms of so-called ‘aid’ serve only to exacerbate their suffering. To be sure, the globalized rich are not solely responsible for the plight of the marginalized poor: endemic political and commercial corruption, outdated land and property laws, repressive cultural and religious traditions, lack of fundamental education and healthcare – all these things combine to disenfranchise, impoverish, and starve hundreds of millions of unfortunate souls.

To make matters worse, agricultural subsidies in affluent nations (primarily the USA and the EU) enable the dumping of artificially cheapened produce onto developing markets, effectively shutting out and bankrupting indigenous food producers. This has the secondary effect of driving thousands of destitute farmers and their families from their lands and into appalling shantytown slums surrounding large urban centers, where they and their children will suffer every conceivable misery known to mankind, with little or no hope of improving their lot in life. This is the hideous underbelly of globalization.
But since our planet has shrunk so much, at least for those with the means to traverse it, and is so highly networked by IT and multimedia coverage, at least for those with the privilege of access, it is impossible to deny or to remain in blissful ignorance of the large-scale human suffering not solely caused, but partly perpetuated, by the affluence of the globalizers. Moreover, it is primarily the affluent who can offer the means of alleviating crushing poverty. Everyone who benefits from globalization must become aware of the suffering of those who are marginalized by it; and everyone who is possessed even of the remotest human sensibility cannot remain morally insensate in the face of so much privation.

World leaders and other key decision-makers have responded in various ways, which include espousing Millennium Development Goals intended to cut poverty in half by the year 2015. Although at least some of these goals are being achieved, even their attainment can backfire in unfortunate ways which worsen poverty for some while alleviating it for others. Thus the poor are often pitted against one another in a cruel struggle for survival, a Hobbesian state of economic nature, whose ‘victors’ are vaulted across the poverty line into the lower middle classes, with new hope for themselves and reasonable optimism for their children; but whose ‘vanquished’ sink even deeper into the abyss of utter destitution, an economic black hole from which escape seems impossible.

Economists have developed sophisticated and seemingly accurate models of the complex dynamics of global hunger and its alleviation, on both macro- and micro-scales, and are able to propose various remedies to key decision-makers. As social scientists, economists study phenomena such as poverty and hunger in reasonably objective and dispassionate ways. As moral human beings, however, they cannot countenance much of what they have learned in the process of such study. Just as medical researchers must approach the epidemiology and pathology of diseases as objectively as possible for the sake of good science, yet as moral beings may be profoundly moved by what they learn in the context of human suffering imposed by disease (especially where it is preventable); so economists of good conscience cannot remain silent in the wake of their discoveries concerning the causes and effects of widespread global hunger.

Given that their economic prescriptions must therefore be alloyed with normative ethics, it is only reasonable that economists of conscience would seek to join forces with moral philosophers – applied ethicists and religionists – who can perhaps help to locate economic prescriptions in moral frameworks, or ground them in ethical theories. There is enough food in the world to sustain everyone; what is lacking is apparently (to revert to a well-worn ‘buzzword’) the political will to redistribute existing resources more equitably, and to implement policies that would both institutionalize such redistribution and inculcate sustainable dynamics of poverty reduction alongside those of wealth creation. Beyond this, perhaps we need to awaken a moral will among the affluent.

This chapter will endeavor to provide some foundational underpinnings to the undertaking of such a task. Like my economist colleagues, I honor dispassionate value-neutrality as a desirable perspective from which to assess existing conditions,