

A Richer Understanding of Poverty

Summary: We redefine poverty to recognise all its aspects, not just numerical amounts of money. This will both enrich theory and make policy and practice more successful.

Poverty is a problem that should be overcome by prosperity and economic growth, many assume, but it isn't. 'Throwing money at it' does not work. On one hand, as one correspondent put it,

"Almost all winners of huge lotteries are completely broke within 8 years. They spend like children in a toy store when parents indulge their every wish, e.g., a Cadillac plated in pure gold!"

On the other, there is a poverty trap, flaws in 'the system' that prevents people escaping poverty, such as the need for capital, the lack of education, poor health, badly-designed legislation, or even family history. There are thus both individual and structural reasons why poverty persists.

Recognising that money alone cannot solve poverty, many thinkers go deeper, trying to rethink poverty itself, redefine what poverty is, and try to understand why money alone does not solve the problem. There are many such ideas. Here we go deeper still, to construct a foundation on which good rethinking might take place. Though poverty has become a slogan used by politicians and media pundits, especially of the left wing, we want to clear that obfuscation away and understand it.

Sounds abstract? But we take into account the multi-faceted real-life experience and occurrence of poverty. As usual, it is largely Dooyeweerd's idea of aspects, as expounded in Chapter 3, that provides the conceptual framework that is wide enough.

pv-1. Ideas About Poverty

Summary: Most theories of poverty focus on one or two aspects alongside the economic, but none attend to them all together.

Poverty is usually defined in monetary terms as "less than \$x per day" (absolute poverty, started as \$1, or \$2.15 from 2022) or "less than x% of the median pay" (relative poverty in affluent cultures). Not only does this open us up to all the problems inherent in measuring value by money mentioned in <"r5-val.html#s-assv">Chapter 5, but it captures very little of the reality of poverty. That the numerical definition of absolute poverty has more than doubled suggests we need a better definition. Many in poverty are actually happier and more content than many wealthy - and were even more so in decades before life was as monetized as it is today.

Theories about poverty have developed over the centuries, and we treat them all as expressing some valid insights but also flaws (see Chapter 3). [Davis & Sanchez-Martinez 2015], for example, summarise several theories, as follows. All of course focus on the economic aspect, but their difference lies in what other main aspects they focus on, which is identified in round brackets, with letters in square brackets to identify them.

Classical theories ['C'] view individuals as largely generating their own poverty (formative aspect), and sub-cultures of poverty grow e.g. by lack of good role models (social). Neoclassical theories ['N'] recognise reasons for poverty beyond individuals' control, such as excluding some people from credit markets and barriers to education (analytic and social aspects) and poor health (biotic). Neo-Keynesians ['K'] focus more public goods, inequality and the role of

governments (social-juridical aspects), and on other macroeconomic factors (aesthetic-harmony aspect). All so far emphasise the quantitative amount of money people have and look to economic growth as a main solution to poverty. Marxian theories ['M'] blame the class system and exploitation (social, juridical and ethical aspects) for poverty. Social exclusion ['X'] and social capital theories focus on understanding the intrinsic processes (social, juridical aspects). Other theories about poverty may be treated likewise.

Of course, most theories, whose main aspect is mentioned there, do cover more aspects but most other aspects are effectively overlooked. Ruth Lister's definition of poverty, "having all the same dreams for the future as everyone else has, but no way on earth to make them come true" feels broader, because less theoretical but also more directly multi-aspectual: dreams can be meaningful in any aspect.

However, it presupposes the right to fulfil all dreams; **not all dreams** should be fulfilled because many are trivial and / or lead to harm (as discussed in Chapter 7). Should the poor *always* aspire to do all that the wealthy do, when it is harmful? We need a proper discussion about that, not political knee-jerk reactions.

Seebom Rowntree's ['R'] definition of (absolute) poverty in York in the late 1800s <"#row00">[Rowntree 2000] does list dreams that, reasonably, should be fulfilled. It was derived from actual experience rather than theory. Though cast in financial terms of not being able to afford certain things, it recognises multiple aspects (in brackets):

"A family living upon the scale allowed for in this estimate must never spend a penny on railway fare or omnibus (kin). They must never go to the country (bio,aes) unless they walk. They must never purchase a halfpenny newspaper (Ing) or spend a penny to buy a ticket for a popular concert (aes). ... They must never contribute anything to their church or chapel (pis), or give any help to a neighbour which costs them money (eth). They cannot save (eco), nor can they join sick club (bio) of Trade Union (jur), because they cannot pay the necessary subscriptions. The children must have not pocket money for dolls, marbles, or sweets (aes). The fathers must smoke no tobacco (aes), and must drink no beer (aes,soc). The mother must never buy any pretty clothes for herself or for her children (aes), the character of the family wardrobe as for the family diet governed by regulation (eco), nothing must be bought but that which is absolutely necessary for the maintenance of physical health (bio), and what is bought must be of the plainest and most economical description (aes). Should a child fall ill, it must be attended by the parish doctor (bio); should it die it must be buried by the parish (soc,pis). Finally the wage earner must never be absent from his work for a single day (eco). If any of these conditions are broken, the extra expenditure involved is met, and can only be met, by limiting the diet; or, in other words, by sacrificing physical efficiency (bio)."

That seems to speak of what is caused by financial poverty, but many of them circle back as causes of, or contributors to, poverty. Surely all the above theory since that time should have taken all those aspects into account, but they do not. Therein lies the poverty of theory about poverty.

pv-2. Aspects of Poverty

Summary: Poverty is meaningful in every aspect, not just the economic.

Poverty is multi-aspectual, in both meaning and causes. In order to understand poverty more deeply, we can separate out different aspects of it by answering the question "What do we mean by poverty; what might make us deem someone

as poor; what do we associate with poverty?” In every aspect from the biotic aspect onwards it is meaningful to say “They are poor” and even the first four aspects contribute to poverty. The theories above usually answer those question by reference to one or two aspects (letters in square brackets referring to the theories). Notice how few main aspects are considered by the theories C,N,K,M,X, but more by R (1800s Rowntree observation).

- ◆ Quantitative aspect: low amounts of income or assets [CNKXR]
- ◆ Spatial aspect: geographic distribution of resources; the North-South divide (both in England and globally) [R]
- ◆ Kinematic aspect: lack of liquid funds (e.g. many farmers) [R]
- ◆ Physical aspect: lack of raw materials; living in an area devastated by climate change
- ◆ Biotic aspect: poor health; substance abuse; living with pollution, lack of good food; locusts destroying crops [NR]
- ◆ Sensitive / psychical aspect: mental or continual emotional stress, sensory impairment or stress (such as having to live with traffic noise or stench),
- ◆ Analytical aspect: prevented from thinking or understanding issues clearly
- ◆ Formative aspect: lack of skills, “not being able to achieve one’s dreams” [C]
- ◆ Lingual aspect: having no voice; illiteracy; lack of education [R]
- ◆ Social aspect: few friends or family; few contacts; also class-based poverty [CNKMXR]
- ◆ Economic aspect: lack of resources (including but not confined to money) [CNKXR]
- ◆ Aesthetic-harmony aspect: out of balance with the surrounding culture (something of relative poverty) [KR]
- ◆ Aesthetic-enjoyment aspect: lack of leisure or pleasure [R]
- ◆ Juridical aspect: injustice, lack of access to legal process [KMXR]
- ◆ Ethical aspect (attitude): lack of loving and being loved, lack of mercy, forgiveness and generosity [MR]
- ◆ Pistic aspect (mindset): lack of dignity (self-esteem) [Fukuyama 2018], morale, sense of meaninglessness; police bias, recruitment bias, [R].

(In real life, of course, things like having no voice is more than just a single-aspect dysfunction; having no voice involves social, juridical and pistic dysfunctions as well as lingual, but in the list we assign things to what seems to be their primary aspect.)

All these ‘are’ poverty. Poverty is very much an economic issue, of course, because lack of money or other resource prevents Good in each aspect, as Rowntree expresses it, but the problematicity of poverty is not lack of money as such, but the inability to do some necessary Good. Many examples of the aesthetic aspect are mentioned by Rowntree, being things that make life enjoyable, and thus could be deemed non-essential, but in Chapter 7 we offer a foundation for understanding what reasonable enjoyment may be justified. And of course, as discussed in Chapter 6, much Good is being done without money (though not without resources). So, judging poverty requires, not monetary measurements, but proper wisdom.

pv-3. ‘Causes’ of Poverty

Summary: Poverty arises from dysfunction in any aspect, and all might be agents in ‘causing’ poverty - thus transcending the left-right divide.

Likewise ‘causes’ of poverty function in many aspects, and if we consider any possible or claimed cause of poverty, we can ask two questions. The first is, “Which aspect(s) are functioning here to bring about this result (any aspect(s) of poverty)?”. This then immediately forces us to ask “Who or what is the agent that is functioning in this way?” The agent might be the poor themselves (e.g.

laziness, squandering what little wealth they have: formative, economic dysfunction), those who shape legislation to favour the wealthy (ethical and juridical dysfunction), structures of society, history, 'natural' causes (e.g. floods, droughts, landslides destroying crops or homes: physical, biotic functioning), and of course, all of us who "walk by on the other side" (ethical dysfunction). All are understood as the (dys)functioning in various aspects.

In this way, **political camps may be transcended** (left-wing commentators blaming the wealthy and capitalism, right-wing commentators blaming the poor themselves). Aspects help us see valid insight in most views, as part of a larger picture (as per our embracive perspective in Chapter 3).

Attitude and mindset are especially important causal factors, applying to all the human agents above (the poor themselves, those in society whose activity impinges on them, and history). They can also be part of the cure when manifested retrocipatorily in our actions meaningful in earlier aspects, such as the lingual and social, as in the following story shared by a correspondent, where one town mayor cared and others did not:

Some years ago, in a small town in Alabama, USA, the mayor got funding to build some quality housing for black people from "the wrong side of the railway line". So did the mayors of other towns. What he also did was to teach them 'how to become middle class' by, for example, supplying lawnmowers, teaching them to mow the lawn and providing follow-up to help them make these practices into habits. The result was that in comparison to the neighbouring, who built similar estates but did not then teach people how to thrive in those houses, his houses are now desirable places to live 70 years on, while the neighbouring towns' equivalent estates are now slums."

pv-4. Inter-aspect Dependency in Poverty

Summary: To understand poverty we must understand inter-aspect dependency.

While some conventional ideas do recognise some of these aspects, they often treat them as caused by poverty rather than aspects of it, implying that overcoming monetary poverty will solve these problems too, as for example Margolit's view that lack of dignity is caused by poverty [Brune 2020]. But it does not. Lawrence Mead [2020] asks, "Why do so many Americans remain destitute in the midst of the world's richest country, even when jobs are available?" It is only when we understand all these as aspects of poverty and understand the **inter-aspect relationships**, that the multiple kinds of 'causality' intertwined and operating in both directions come to light.

Each of Rowntree's factors indicates a dependency on the economic aspect, and each cause of poverty indicates the dependency of the economic aspect on them. All aspects interact with each other, in both directions, and **reinforce each other**. This is why poverty cannot be overcome merely by economic means of higher wages, lower prices or redistribution of wealth. Though these do, of course, play some part, to work properly all the other aspects of poverty need to be given due respect and brought into the poverty discourse and policy planning.

We, individuals and society, must function well in all non-economic aspects, for people to escape poverty.

Many recent thinkers have recognised this, but mainly for the early aspects, the biotic and physical aspects of poverty (ill health, low biodiversity and ecosystem, and climate changing to more frequent and severe droughts and floods) especially in the Global South. They recognise both that these cause poverty and also that poverty exacerbates them. Example: people cut down the few remaining trees for firewood and lose all the beneficial animals, insects, and also soil-stabilizing trees

and other plants. Many are now realising that environmental responsibility is important to address poverty.

A popular right-wing comment is that many people are poor by their own fault. Though this seems rather harsh and unfeeling, their reasoning needs to be properly considered, especially when a left-wing commentator (on the UK Guardian newspaper) says something similar. Working for years with a poverty charity, she discovered that the children of previous clients were returning a decade later with the same problems; the funding that they had passed to the parents had not solved the problem, the funding having been used not to buy food but to buy expensive fashionable footwear for the children. What these right-wing commenatators do not (seem to want to) understand is that poverty actually makes people want aspirational goods, because of the pistic aspect of poverty: low dignity. The 'causality' is in both directions, mutual reinforcement, and in all aspects. (x It is interesting that one of the main societal thrusts of both Judaic and Christian perspectives is to reduce poverty. x)

pv-5. More on Attitude and Mindset ('Culture')

Summary: As with other economic phenomena, attitude and mindset (often referred to as culture) are important roots of poverty.

Increasingly, the importance of **culture** is discussed as an important factor in poverty. In Chapter 6 we suggested that **attitude and mindset** (ethical and pistic functioning) are what largely constitutes culture. We will look at a couple of seminal articles on this through the lens of these two and other aspects.

The importance of **self-giving versus self-centred attitude** is seen in the example above, which contrasted the failure of town mayors who, after providing housing resource to people, did little more, and the mayor who "went the extra mile" by engaging with the people housed, to help them learn a new way of living.

Brune [2021] discusses the link between poverty and that specific manifestation of **pistic functioning, dignity**, discussing three thinkers on this. The first, by Margalit, sees poverty 'causing' "dignity violations". The liberal approach of Nussbaum sees dignity as a value, but one emerging from (and thus reducible to) capabilities. Dworkin asserts that dignity is an objective aspect, but ultimately reduces it to ethical-moral aspects. What neither Brune nor the three on whom he draws arrive at is (a) dignity as (a manifestation of) an aspect that transcends us and is irreducibly distinct from other aspects (not arising causally from economic, formative or ethical aspects) and thus worthy of taking seriously in its own right; (b) how lack of dignity itself contributes to poverty. The lack of dignity is, in some sense, part of what it means to be poor.

In *Poverty and Culture*, Mead [2020] calls on culture to explain why there is so much destitution in the world's richest country (the USA), and it turns out he focuses most on **mindset**. He argues that it is cultural differences that keep people poor, especially between cohorts in the USA like American whites, Mexicans, Blacks, etc. He discusses many cultural factors that thinkers have suggested, including:

some becoming poor because they reject middle-class values like hard work and responsibility to "absolute standards", aspiring to Hollywood-star lives of 'freedom' on drugs; "culture of poverty ... where disadvantaged men decline regular jobs and mothers refuse to marry them, producing troubled families and other ills"; "the poor have experienced defeat ... So they see little hope"; "what most people think life is about" (the prosperous West have "more ambitious life style ... confident, enterprising way of life ... individualists ... view life as a project" whereas in the less-prosperous non-West "a more cautious and collective mindset usually prevails ... seek to adjust to the demands made by the outside world, rather than seeking change ... chief goal is simply survival").

Almost everything in that broad sweep expresses function or dysfunction in the pistic aspect (mindset), of ultimate meaningfulness (“**what ... life is about**”) and its manifestations in presuppositions, beliefs, expectations, aspirations and commitments, which then impacts all else people do. In an implicit acknowledgement of retrocipatory impact on other aspects, he states, “Cultural difference helps to explain the two most puzzling things about the long-term poor: their tepid response to opportunity and the frequent disorder in their personal lives.”

The problem with Mead is that then tries to reduce all the complexity of culture around poverty down to one over-simple, theorized dichotomy: individualism versus being defined by community. Culture is much more than that. Elsewhere we have discussed the problems of individualistic cultures when they become selfish (dysfunction in the ethical aspect): though the selfish might make money for themselves and families, they impoverish others, wreck society more generally, wreck planet and nature, and even other aspects of their own lives, so poverty overall gets worse.

Mead’s dichotomy is one seen mainly from the perspective of the social aspect, though with some formative (achievement-focus) thrown in. Yet there are many other aspects involved in culture, not least the ethical (attitude) as part of its functioning, and also various target aspects of the pistic functioning (what we believe life is about), including language (lingual), history (formative-social), geography (spatial), health (biotic), institutions (social), etc.

This multi-aspectual view of culture, as ethical and pistic functioning linked with all other aspects, offers a foundational understanding, in which Mead’s freed, capable individual is recognised as important, yet only among all other aspects. It cuts across the right-left divide, by recognising that both the poor themselves, structures and others all play a part. Mindset and attitude either can make poverty worse and lock people in or can help release people and communities from poverty in all its aspects, as we saw in the tale of the Alabama mayor. We may understand this as the retrocipative impact that functioning in these last two aspects have on all the others - both individual and societal functioning. This can open new doors to tackling poverty.

pv-6. Tackling Poverty

Summary: Tackling poverty requires action in every aspect, not just one or two.

The failure of groups like the G7, G20 and the United Nations at the global level, and of governments at the national level, to adequately tackle poverty may be understood by recognising that they tend to focus on the juridical and economic aspects. Since poverty has meaning in every aspect and has multi-aspectual causes, tackling it also requires a multi-aspectual approach. The following list suggests some issues meaningful in each aspect, and readers are invited to offer examples of how action may be taken in each aspect - because many of them will have more expertise and wisdom in this than we do. The first three (“mathematical”) aspects are applied to tackling poverty in the other aspects.

- ◆ Quantitative aspect: Ensure enough (but not too much) resources in all meaningful in all other aspects.
- ◆ Spatial aspect: Tackle location and proximity of essential resources.
- ◆ Kinematic aspect: Logistics in providing all kinds of essential resources.
- ◆ Physical aspect: Materials
- ◆ Biotic aspect: Health and access to nature.
- ◆ Sensitive / psychical aspect: Sensory, emotional and mental health
- ◆ Analytical aspect: Clarity of thinking

- ◆ Formative aspect: Skills, capabilities, techniques
- ◆ Lingual aspect: Language, information, education
- ◆ Social aspect: Relationships, roles, collaboration
- ◆ Economic aspect: Resource
- ◆ Aesthetic-harmony aspect: Balance and harmony in life; enjoyment
- ◆ Juridical aspect: Access to justice; being responsible
- ◆ Ethical aspect (attitude): Love, generosity, both to and by the poor
- ◆ Pistic aspect (mindset): Dignity, beliefs, meaning in life, something to commit to beyond the self.

Attitude and mindset of both individuals involved and that pervade society (culture) are particularly important, though too rarely given consideration in tackling poverty. One exception might be the UK charity, Christians Against Poverty, who find that when they get debt-ridden people to give away some of their income, their financial position actually improves, and thus actively encourage this. Here we see worked out in practice the innate paradox in the ethical aspect, that genuine self-giving benefits the giver. Giving also instils in their clients some dignity (pistic functioning) as agents and as recognising also the importance of others.

Action in the post-social aspects tends to spread. Action in the juridical, ethical and pistic aspects can change the structures that entrap people in poverty. But, ultimately, as we have discussed in Chapter 6 and in even more detail in <“#”>Chapter 3, there needs to be **repentance** (change of heart) in affluent cultures over our presuppositions around wealth and poverty. Both the poor and the wealthy must have changed heart, the wealthy no longer being self-protecting, greedy, mean and calculating (and being willing to pay reparations), and the poor needing to abandon victim outlooks and bitterness. But repentance needs to be genuine; too often it is partial and/or hypocritical. The Judaic perspectives, outlined in Chapter 3, especially can inform our discussions.

pv-7. Conclusion

Too summarise: Poverty is a multi-aspectual issue, meaningful in every aspect, and has causes in every aspects. So tackling it must involve action in every aspect. What this entails is that economic theory and practice should explicitly take every aspect into account, not just the economic aspect as is usually the case. The economic aspect of poverty should be seen, not as the defining aspect of poverty, but as a servant of the others, as concerned with resources that enable non-poverty in each of its other meanings.

These aspects apply equally to the poor themselves, other people (especially the wealthy), and structures of society ('systems'). (In this way our foundation transcends, and even embraces the insights from, the left- and right-wing camps in politics and economics).

Particular attention needs to be given to attitude and mindset, the ethical and pistic aspects, because the stubborn prevalence of poverty is due to dysfunctional culture. Not just to provision of funds, nor even when accompanied by education programmes, but to the attitude and mindset of both the 'system', of the poor themselves and of other people, especially the wealthy.

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