

The moral case for tackling the root causes of hunger

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- with expert advice from Dr Julian Baggini¹ and Dr Nigel Dower¹

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In a country that claims to be fair and compassionate, the continued high levels of household food insecurity in the UK are nothing short of scandalous. There are several moral principles that suggest that, in order to address this, we have to tackle the root causes of hunger, not just hunger itself.

First, **in a wealthy society, no one should go hungry**. In 2018, the UK was the fifth largest economy in the world. Food is a basic physiological and social need and so the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations concluded that everyone “has a right to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger”. The role of the state is to ensure that the basic needs of its citizens are met. This is the basis of the social contract that justifies the power of the state, including how it can levy taxes. In relation to food, such needs include hospitality, sociability, variety and nutrition appropriate for physical and mental health.

Second, **everyone has a right to share in a country’s basic resources and wealth**. No one becomes affluent by their own efforts alone. They rely on the natural resources, legal structures and infrastructure. Because these are the property of the nation and not individuals, it is right that everyone receives some benefit from their exploitation. In an affluent society that should mean the right to access a minimum of them to lead a healthy, happy, decent life. If people are hungry, or unable to obtain enough food for health and wellbeing, that right is being denied.

Third, there is a strong **utilitarian argument** that **a rich society should not be so unequal that some go hungry**. Even if someone does not care about the welfare of the poor, to allow an excluded underclass to grow undermines the vitality of the nation and ultimately affects economic, social and political stability and effectiveness².

If we accept that hunger in a rich country is morally wrong, then it quickly follows that the best way to deal with it is to address the root causes rather than the symptoms. Kant’s dictum ‘he who wills the end (if he is rational) wills the means necessary to it’³ is helpful. **If we will the elimination of hunger and we are rational, then we must will the conditions – root causes – of that hunger to be removed**. Simply offering food to those who can’t otherwise get it is not a long-term solution to the problem. A case could even be made that aid-givers in fact distract from the need to understand and address the root cause. Giving food to those in need enables society to turn a blind eye to the real problems.

To varying degrees, we are all complicit in the failure to properly tackle the root causes of hunger. However, the state, as manifest by national and local government, has a fundamental responsibility and a particularly critical role. In a society such as the UK, this includes the oversight and, if necessary, regulation of activities of private sector individuals or organisations, where they impinge on people’s rights to access good food. It also requires ensuring all can earn enough to buy, or otherwise obtain sufficient appropriate, healthy food for an active life, and to fulfil social obligations.

¹ Member of the Food Ethics Council

² 2009, Wilkinson and Pickett, *The Spirit Level: why equality is better for everyone*; 2019, *The Inner Level: How More Equal Societies Reduce Stress, Restore Sanity and Improve Everyone’s Well-being*

³ 1785, Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*

The answer to ending hunger is not giving people food, nor enabling them to buy food which is 'super-cheap'. It is neither fair nor sustainable to just aim for everyone having enough food to meet calorific need. That leads to a two-tier system where only the rich have access to 'good' food and the poor are expected to 'make do'. It also means sustaining a system that delivers nutritionally deficient and unsustainably sourced food, with animals treated inhumanely. If the root causes of hunger are addressed, the food system will have to provide sufficient fair, healthy, environmentally sustainable and humane food for all. This will also give people the confidence that such access will continue, thus providing the food security that is necessary for a thriving society. We should not demonise people going hungry. Instead we must build resilience and empower people at the individual level and the systemic level, including governments ensuring there is a properly functioning safety net.

Tackling hunger without tackling the root causes only treats symptoms of the problem: it is inefficient, ineffective, short-sighted and wrong. Hence, we need to look at the root causes of this system failure, and address them so that, in fairness, all have the means to meet their human needs. This is not simply a matter of justice now but for the future. If we address the root causes of hunger, generations to come will be free from the misery and social exclusion it produces.

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