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Pandemic & Homelessness

Introduction

What do we owe to those who are homeless? In G.K. Chesterton's 1955 *The Glass Walking-Stick*, he wrote the following: "We must not only share our bread, but share our hunger." Chesterton's quote echoes a (often forgotten) frequent Biblical moral imperative to, in addition to carrying our own crosses (Lu. 9: 23), take on the suffering, hardship and difficulties of others (Rom. 12:15; Gal. 6:2; Col. 1:24; 2 Cor. 1:3-4). We entitle this moral imperative the 'CBMI.' We are not merely called to give food to others, but be hungry for them as well. In this work, we ask how we might apply the CBMI within the COVID-19 pandemic. Statistically, the experience of isolation, loneliness and difficulties in belonging have increased. Given this, it is our question to ask: how might we use these participatory experiences to serve the homeless who experience these difficult realities in virtue of being homeless? Here is how we will proceed in the paper. First, we provide a brief statistical background which makes clear the pervasive existence of homelessness in Canada, focusing on Toronto as a case study. Second, we argue for the CBMI as a moral imperative. Third, we show how the CBMI is sufficient to account for our moral responsibilities towards those who are homeless. Fourth, we briefly reply to five objections against our thesis.

Homelessness in Canada: Toronto as a Case Study

While anyone familiar with Toronto need not assess statistics to understand the prevalence of homelessness, it is worth mentioning them in brief. According to Anderson-Baron and Collins (2017), more than 235,000 Canadians find themselves experiencing homelessness in a year, with up to 15% of these individuals having homelessness being a recurring issue. The number of Canadians using shelters has increased by more than 10% within the last 10 years (Gaetz, Dej, Richter, & Redman, 2016). In Toronto alone, following a *Street Needs Assessment* in 2018, almost 9,000 people were homeless in one night (City of Toronto,

2018). Additionally, given the new circumstances of COVID-19, people who are homeless are facing increased (equitable) needs for housing (City of Toronto, 2020). People who are homeless and those who do not have adequate shelter face many negative repercussions on their social determinants of health e.g., having unmet medical needs, requiring hospitalization and emergency room visits frequently (Pauly, 2019).[1] The question we ask in this paper is the following: what is our moral responsibility towards these vulnerable individuals who are homeless? The two answers often given are the following: to become benefactors (to give to them their basic sustenance e.g., food, water, shelter, et cetera) and to cause ourselves to suffer *via* our beneficence (cause financial hardship on ourselves). In this brief paper, we argue for a third moral responsibility towards those who are homeless.

The Chesterton-Biblical Moral Imperative (CBMI)

In G.K. Chesterton's 1955 *The Glass Walking-Stick*, he wrote the following: "We must not only share our bread, but share our hunger." There are two elements to this thesis. First, its theological heritage within the Christian (New Testament) ethical tradition. Second, the underlying, practical, moral imperative. First, Chesterton's quote is reflective of New Testament ethics, especially in the letters of St. Paul in the New Testament:

"weep with those who weep" (κλαίειν μετὰ κλαιόντων) (Romans 12:15)

"bear each others' burdens" (Ἀλλήλων τὰ βάρη βαστάζετε) (Galatians 6:2)

"I am suffering for you" (χαίρω ἐν τοῖς παθήμασιν ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν) (Colossians 1:24)

"we can comfort [via God's comfort] those in any trouble" (παρακαλεῖν τοὺς ἐν πάσῃ θλίψει [ὑπὸ ὁ παρακαλῶν]) (2 Corinthians 1:3–4)

In each case, St. Paul makes the argument that we have the following moral imperative (which we abbreviate the 'CBMI': *we should not*

1 We have flagged the following. Despite its seemingly positive outlook on how to increase housing for those who are homeless, this policy has gaps that ought to be addressed. To begin, one does not merely need the right to housing (especially during a pandemic), but they need the right to *a healthy, safe* and *sustainable* home (City of Toronto, 2020). Additionally, this policy places emphasis on turning away from short-term emergency responses to homelessness (City of Toronto, 2020); however, any policy that underemphasizes the importance of short-term emergency responses is bound to underappreciate the unique difficulties those short-term emergencies are involved with fixing. Lastly, a third gap apparent in this policy is the lack of discussion for accessible housing for those who have disabilities (City of Toronto, 2020). Those who are homeless and have disabilities should not be forgotten in policy construction, especially ones designed to serve each person's accessibility needs.

merely/only aim to alleviate the suffering of others or cause ourselves to suffer because they suffer, but take on/share in/participate in their *suffering itself*. For example, when we become benefactors to a charitable organization, (i) we self-inflict a small amount of financial hardship and (ii) do so for the sake of alleviating the suffering of the person suffering. However, there is no participatory role for the benefactor to share in the hardships of the beneficiary: there is no moral demand for first-person, lived experiential sharing in the beneficiary's sufferings. We argue that from this that the conjunction of (i) and (ii) are insufficiently morally demanding.

Is Giving Food Enough? An Argument for the CBMI

We give the following argument for why why (i) and (ii) are insufficient moral demands independent of CBMI: the Unity Condition (UC) and the Motivating Condition (MC). We use the MC as a descriptive ethical claim: a primary motivator for ethical action is lived experience of the hardship one seeks to alleviate. Put informally, one does not understand (adequately/sufficiently) the suffering of hunger if one has never been, in experience, hungry (in distinction to propositionally knowing about hunger). We then offer UC as a normative ethical claim: in cases where (i) and (ii) are present, there lacks nevertheless the communal aspect of suffering in which a person is in an (epistemic) position to adequately understand the suffering of another. We argue that engaging with the homeless should be more than simply the delivering of goods/services and self-inflicted hardships e.g., giving money, spending time, listening to their stories, et cetera (although these are all important); instead, there should also be *unity* with the individual who is suffering. (This is what we mean by the 'Unity Condition' (UC)). Consider two religious examples which elucidate such unity. First, the Catholic practice of intercessory fasting. The practice involves a Catholic who fasts e.g., from food, drink or some other good, as a prayer/supplication to God for another person. This is a deliberate attempt to give up some degree of security/comfort (and hence an instance of suffering) as a petition to God for another person. Rather than simply vocally pray that God brings about alleviation of suffering, intercessory fasting requires taking on their hardship as a prayer to God.[2] Second, consider the Muslim practice of fasting during Ramadan. Independent of its root theological meaning, the practice cultivates understanding the extraordinary difficulty of ordinary work without the luxury of a full stomach and adequate hydration. In these examples, there is an active, participatory experience

2 Catholics also practice offering their suffering (redemptive suffering) to the Cross of Christ (Colossians 1:24).

which puts one in a position to (epistemically) understand, and therefore be uniquely unified with, the suffering individual.

We offer the global COVID19 pandemic as a case study of the CBMI at work. Consider that during the global pandemic there has been an increased rate of isolation, loneliness and difficulties in belonging. The increased rates of isolation (and loneliness) have been brought about by social and physical distancing, increased lockdown measures and the pressure to avoid individuals with whom one is not seeing on a regular basis.[3] No evidence for this claim needs to be put forth: we are currently in a *Zoom* chat giving this talk. From such isolation/loneliness comes a difficulty in belonging inasmuch as one is (ordinarily) disassociated from one's communities they belong with e.g., in our context, the institutional/academic community The University of Toronto provides. However, one such group that experiences all three of these experiences (isolation, loneliness and difficulties in belonging), albeit magnified *via* their lack of stable and safe home/home environment, are the homeless.

We now offer an ethical analysis of our moral responsibilities to those who are homeless.[4] Re-iterating our earlier analysis, we have a moral responsibility to (i) become benefactors to those who are homeless and (ii) do so for the sake of those who are homeless. However, (i) and (ii) are insufficient without the CBMI. The CBMI here gives the benefactor two further moral, actionable demands. First, to recognize that one's experience in lockdown does/can parallel the experience of those who are homeless in a limited, participatory way. We can/should cultivate, by way of introspective self-reflection, a realization of our existential vulnerabilities, material insecurities and medical fragility during the COVID19 pandemic as a motivator (MC) to take action in alleviating homelessness. The global pandemic has involuntarily caused much suffering, but that suffering can be re-interpreted for its morally actionable, motivational potential. Second, the CBMI morally demands one to become *unified* with those who suffer from being homelessness. While CBMI requires unification in the former sense of self-reflective re-interpretation of one's experiences, it also envisions further concrete action which seeks to give up one's false sense of material and economic security that joins onto the suffering of those who are homeless.

3 A theoretical advantage to this paper is that we do not make – nor require to make – any statement for/against lockdowns, vaccines, and so forth.

4 We do not engage in the core socio-legal discussions surrounding homelessness and the COVID19 pandemic, although these are ineliminable facets of the discussion (City of Toronto, 2020)

Objections and Replies

We will raise and reply briefly to five criticisms of our position.[5] First objection: the claim that one must suffer what someone else suffers to understand their sufferings in every case is mistaken. For example, we can aim to eradicate sexual assault and help victims without having to be sexually assaulted ourselves. In reply, our argument does not require that experiential knowledge is the only form of knowledge; however, it privileges experiential knowledge while acknowledging the existence of propositional knowledge. We admit that we can know what being hungry means when we have never experienced hunger; however, we reject that propositionally understanding hunger motivates ethical action over experiential hunger.

Second objection: the CBMI implies that as a matter of practical consideration one should focus on what an individual should do and not what society can do e.g., social justice activism. In reply, social justice activism has historically been brought about by way of individual-focused action in two senses. First, in self-purification prior to moral condemnation of others. Second, in focusing on individual change and not collective, social change. a case example is Dr. Martin Luther King Junior's nonviolent direct action campaign. He abided by the New Testament principle that before one takes out the speck in one's brother's eye, one should first take out the log in their own (Matthew 7:5).

Third objection: who can perform the CBMI is based on presumed socio-economic status which is morally problematic. Not everyone enjoys a sufficient degree of socio-economic, intellectual or cognitive privilege which permits them to do the CBMI. In reply, our argument makes no specific case for the degree to which one should incur participatory suffering; however, two examples suffice to show that independent of socio-economic condition, our argument is applicable. First, I (Author

5 We will briefly reply to Dr. Jean-Pierre Fortin's two criticisms of this paper. First, he has argued that we need to assess the plight of the homeless as caused by the privileged to avoid individuals *pretending* to suffer for the homeless and giving up privilege that marginalizes them. In reply, we argue that it is not clear how our privilege (which is extraordinarily complex e.g., especially in the differentiation in different kings of privilege i.e., intellectual, familial, cognitive, et cetera) is (in)directly related to those who are "marginalized" (a term which is often imprecise and vague, even if invoked frequently). Our approach would suggest prudential casuistry here: it should be assessed on a case-by-case basis. However, even granting that privileged individuals cause the marginalization of those who are homeless, it does not logically follow that the best way to reverse/alleviate/undo this marginalization is to give up the privilege: it might be in using that privilege (especially when one has a lot of privilege and consequently power) for the good. Second, Dr. Fortin also argues that we should be attentive to the sharing of *humanity* rather than the sharing of *hunger*. In reply, our paper is consistent with this thesis and accepts it: sharing hunger is *instrumental* to sharing humanity.

1) met a priest in London who worked at St. Joseph's Hospitality Centre in 2017. He told me a story about a homeless woman he and a priest-friend had taken to dinner. When they were done eating together, he (my priest friend) realized that the woman had been saving half of her food. The priest thought to himself: "she must be putting the food away for later. But, I should ask because I am interested." As he was about to ask, a man came running into the restaurant and said to the woman with these priests: "Honey, I was worried sick about you, I am so glad you're safe." The woman said: "I am safe, and I have saved half of my food for you." Second, Jesus tells a story about a widow who gave all she had (two copper coins, approximately no money at all in today's currency): Jesus dignifies her for giving "out of her poverty" (ἐκ τῆς ὑστερήσεως) (Mark 12: 41-44). There are no boundaries to the CBMI.

Fourth objection: there is no moral efficacy or improvement which is brought about by the CBMI: a tree is known by its fruit and not the fruit by its tree (Luke 6:44).[6] The beneficiary is primarily in need of basic necessities, not merely more suffering of others. In reply, there are (at least) two efficacious improvements that come about through the CBMI. First, the aim is that (in the ideal case), an internal virtuous change in the benefactor/sufferer is brought about, cultivating the virtues of conviviality, warmheartedness and hospitality. Second, there is the explicit recognition that one's socio-economic, intellectual/cognitive privilege (among other kinds of privilege) are not inherently bad; instead, it such privilege should be periodically given up to both understand and alleviate the suffering of others.

Fifth objection: our thesis is insensitive to those struggling with mental health illness during the global pandemic. It tacitly assumes that individuals who are not homeless enjoy a distinctive kind of privilege, security and comfort – which is untrue e.g., many inside struggle with increased rates of depression, anxiety, suicide ideation, et cetera. In reply, we urge three points. First, our argument is sensitive to limitations to carrying out the CBMI, and thereby does not overgeneralize. Second, our argument – as we showed in the third objection – is in some contexts applicable to those themselves who are homeless. Third and finally, we

6 An anonymous reviewer has suggested that the problem with individual-based action is the worry of virtue-signalling. We reply twofold. First, collective-based action is just as susceptible to virtue-signalling. Rooting moral problems in social/systemic-institutional terms (i.e., social justice) is overtly susceptible to rejecting one's individual responsibility in the eradication of such moral problems. Second, our argument is that the aforementioned moral responsibilities to those who are homeless are insufficiently demanding, and that *more* is required. Far from being opposed to virtue-signalling, our thesis is (or promotes) the *opposite* of virtue-signalling.

suggest that the CBMI is self-extensional and thereby effective in lessening the sense of lonely alienation caused by the global pandemic.

Conclusion

In G.K. Chesterton's 1955 *The Glass Walking-Stick*, he wrote the following: "We must not only share our bread, but share our hunger." Chesterton's quote echoed an (often forgotten) Biblical moral imperative to, in addition to carrying our own crosses (Lu. 9: 23), take on the suffering, hardship and difficulties of others (Rom. 12:15; Gal. 6:2; Col. 1:24; 2 Cor. 1:3-4). We entitled this moral imperative the 'CBMI.' We are not merely called to give food to others, but be hungry for them as well. In this work, we asked how we might apply the CBMI within the COVID19 pandemic. We did this in four steps. First, we provided a brief statistical background which made clear the pervasive existence of homelessness in Canada, focusing on Toronto as a case study. Second, we argued for the CBMI as a moral imperative. Third, we showed how the CBMI was sufficient to account for our moral responsibilities towards those who are homeless. Fourth, we briefly replied to five objections raised against our thesis.

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Abstrakt

Abstract This essay concerns a fundamental question of distributive justice, situated within the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic: What do we owe to those who are homeless? By way of response, this essay argues that G.K. Chesterton's insight that "we must not only share our bread, but share our hunger" is a novel, plausible contribution towards answering this question. While we argue philosophically in defense of Chesterton's moral imperative, we source his argument historically in the Biblical moral imperative to, in addition to carrying our own crosses (Luke 9: 23), take on the suffering, hardship and difficulties of others (Romans 12:15; Galatians 6:2; Colossians 1:24; 2 Cor. 1:3-4). Having defended the moral imperative to "share our hunger", we address how we might apply this moral imperative within the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically how might we use these participatory experiences (participating in their hunger by being hungry for them) to serve the homeless.

Keywords: Pandemic; COVID-19; Homelessness; Responsibility; Justice

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