

## Setting self-interest aside to make poverty history

### *Thought for the Day*

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May I ask for your sympathy for a neglected and downtrodden minority – those of us labouring over piles of steaming examination scripts! My own bed of nails is made of philosophy essays, now it's recognised that it's no bad thing to teach pupils to think!

Utilitarianism is a favourite topic – the doctrine that an action is morally right insofar as it promotes the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Of course, as every pupil knows, this is just daft – it makes selling your spare kidney not just morally permissible, but actually obligatory! On the other hand, although it's a crazy theory about right action, it makes much more sense as a theory of good government: we do expect our rulers to follow policies that seek to maximise the welfare of the average citizen.

But that's the rub! Governments only have an obligation to their own citizens, not to the whole world – and not only because they want to be re-elected; if you could only save one person from a burning building, who would you save – your sister or a stranger?

... and yet ...

That's why it's so remarkable that the governments of the so-called developed world are starting to think about the problems of poverty and disease elsewhere, and in particular in Africa. There might be disagreement about how best to make poverty history, but there is little disagreement about the goal.

On the other hand, while it's easy to lampoon the “come in; ye'll have had yer demo” brigade, the riots that accompanied previous G8 summits are a fact. And it escapes me how reversing globalisation could save a single African AIDS victim; on the contrary, medical research can only advance at the global level. There are seldom simple solutions to complex problems, and I'd suggest that what the world needs is thoughtful policy, not gestures and slogans.

Later today Scottish religious leaders will issue a joint statement supporting the aim of making poverty history; and throughout the country, post-Higher pupils are planning fund-raising concerts and activities. These will get less media attention than chain-link fences and arm-linked demonstrators, but that is where policies and attitudes really start to change.