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Trapped in the Present: Poverty and the Undermining of Prospective Agency

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Poverty has traditionally been conceived of as a state of deprivation. To be poor is to lack something essential to human flourishing. How that something is understood—in terms of welfare, resources, or capabilities—and how it is measured—in absolute terms or relative to a social standard—has been the subject of much debate within the development literature. In this paper, I put forward an account of poverty rooted in the philosophy of action. I argue that poverty essentially involves being in a context in which a reasonable agent's future-directed agency is systemically undermined. Centering this dimension of poverty allows us to attend to aspects of poverty that are easily overlooked on existing accounts.

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Trapped in the Present: Poverty and the Undermining of Prospective Agency

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Poverty has diverse manifestations. In low-income countries, people living in poverty generally lack basic necessities such as clean water, safe housing, and a nutritious diet. In higher-income countries, those living in poverty often work low-wage jobs, depend on welfare benefits, and own consumer goods, such as cars and cell phones, which would be marks of affluence in low-income countries.[1]

One way of thinking about poverty focuses on absolute deprivation. Thomas Pogge, for instance, argues that to be poor, one must lack "access to safe food and water, clothing, shelter, and basic medical care."[2] According to this approach, the two versions of poverty described above exist in a continuum, with people experiencing poverty in low-income countries being more deprived than those in higher-income countries. A relative deprivation account would have us count both cases as instances of poverty by relativizing each case to that country's mean or average.[3] These two ways of thinking about poverty are closely tied to views about how we ought to measure it. Setting the measurement question is taken to be critical to determining whether we have made progress in eradicating poverty and guiding future policy that has poverty alleviation as a goal. Thus, much attention has been devoted to developing poverty analyses guided by the measurement goal.

In this essay, I develop an approach to poverty that starts from a common experience reported by those who have been impoverished—a sense of being trapped in the present and being thwarted from pursuing goals that extend far into the future. I aim to show that when we center this aspect of poverty in how we think about the phenomenon, we start to notice facets that are easy to miss on accounts that focus solely on material deprivation.[4]

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[1] This is not to deny that in wealthier countries there are people who are poor even by the developing country standard.

[2] Pogge, 2007, p. 11.

[3] For a discussion of how indirect and direct measures of poverty are combined, see Ringen 1988.

[4] Surprisingly, the experience of poverty itself hasn't been the subject of substantial philosophical analysis. For important exceptions see: Ci 2013; Higgins, King, and Shaw 2008; Wolff, Lamb, and Zur-Szpiro 2015; Wisor 2011.

Drawing on work in the philosophy of action about the importance of prospective agency to our engagement with planning, values, relationships, and life projects, I argue that a central normatively critical feature of poverty is being in a context in which a reasonable agent's prospective agency is systemically undermined. I suggest that understanding this aspect of poverty is essential and deserves further theoretical attention. When we center prospective agency, we are in a better position to articulate critiques of poverty-promoting social structures, working conditions, and welfare policies that are agency-undermining.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that we can do without analyses that more easily lend themselves to the goals of development scholars and activists. Conceptual articulations of poverty serve a lot of different political and ethical aims. However, focusing on this central aspect of poverty is a fertile vein that has been underexplored in the philosophical discussion of poverty.

I. TRAPPED IN THE PRESENT

People in poverty repeatedly describe being thwarted from projecting themselves into the future by the necessity of having to focus on the present. This sense of being 'trapped in the present' is echoed in descriptions of poverty by people in low-income and high-income countries, the working poor, and those dependent on the safety net.

In the 1990s, the World Bank commissioned an in-depth study of poverty—*The Voices of the Poor*—in which impoverished people across the globe described their experiences. Many people living in poverty are employed, but work is not enough to propel them out of poverty. This is not just because their work doesn't pay enough, though in many cases that is undoubtedly a factor, but the conditions under which people work are themselves a source of instability and insecurity. A participant in Kalofer, Bulgaria, describes it this way: "There's great insecurity now. You can't make any plans. For all I know, tomorrow I might be told that we'll be laid off for a couple of months or that the factory is to shut down. We work three days a week even now, and you're in for a surprise every day."[5]

Katharina Hecht and Kate Summers compare the experiences of time between people in poverty and those with higher incomes in the UK. They argue that "living on a low income and the concomitant absence of wealth does not allow for much attention to be given beyond an insecure present."[6] The descriptions of life offered by the low-income participants point to the excruciating attention and focus they *must* pay to the

[5] Narayan, et al. 2000, p. 36.

[6] Hecht and Summers 2021, p. 737.

present. Going to the grocery store, while a relatively unremarkable event for the well-to-do, can be a taxing exercise in careful, deliberate, efficient decision-making for those trying to stretch a few bills to cover their needs. Pemberton and collaborators also find a similar experience among their poor interviewees; one describes her life as "existing, rather than living."[7]

The working poor in the United States describe similar experiences of precarity and insecurity.[8] This feature of working life for those in poverty has been further exacerbated by technology that allows employers to minimize labor costs ever more efficiently and pass on the cost of inefficiencies to employees.[9] For example, if tomorrow's sudden rainstorm will depress the number of customers visiting a coffee shop, the algorithm will recommend staffing fewer workers for that day. A worker might get little advance notice that her hours have been cut or her shift canceled. The rise of such technology has led to an increasing number of workers who face irregular schedules, fewer opportunities for full-time work, and less 'downtime' at work.[10] These working conditions disrupt workers' lives, making it difficult to plan childcare, attend college, or count on benefits.[11] Because this technology has deeply penetrated many industries, particularly low-wage work, employees know that changing jobs is unlikely to result in better working conditions.

In many wealthier countries, those who cannot work or make ends meet despite working turn to various programs that form the welfare 'safety net.' These programs vary from country to country, state to state, and even city or town. For example, those who qualify for such provisions must navigate a dizzyingly complex set of overlapping bureaucratic systems in the United States.[12] One of the most heart-breaking descriptions of how the byzantine 'safety net' traps families in poverty can be found in Andrea Elliot's book *Invisible Child: Poverty, Survival & Hope in an American City*. Elliot describes how the resources the city offers the unhoused do not free families from the mind-consuming task of survival but impose a different version of it mediated by forms, bureaucrats, and punishing rules.[13] Elliot describes the family she shadows as being "consumed by the project of survival."[14]

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[7] Pemberton, et al. 2017, p.1166. See also Standing 2011.

[8] For a compelling description of this kind of instability, see Morduch and Schneider 2017.

[9] O'Neil 2017.

[10] Guendelsberger 2019.

[11] Schneider and Harknett 2019.

[12] Desmond 2023.

[13] Elliott 2021. Similar descriptions can be found in Desmond 2016.

[14] Elliot 2021, pp. 276–277.

These cases show us the many faces of poverty—some the result of material deprivation, but others generated by working conditions, housing laws, or even the very system of welfare meant to address poverty. People in these various contexts appear to share an experience of being trapped in the present, hindered from planning for the future.

I do not wish to deny that there are significant differences. A family in a homeless shelter and someone working at an Amazon warehouse in the United States are not in the same situation as those on the verge of starvation in less wealthy nations. However, one common feature that recurs across these different material manifestations of poverty is having one's prospective agency undermined by the demands of one's context.

Behavioral economists have suggested that being thwarted from future-directed decision-making might not just reflect the experience of poverty but also play a role in exacerbating poverty traps. People in poverty are more likely to play the lottery, take out high-interest loans, and avail themselves of check-cashing services.[15] Anuj Shah, Sendhil Mullainathan, and Eldar Shafir's research suggests that this is because resource scarcity leads those in poverty to hyper-focus on the present at the expense of the future.[16] In the scenarios in which they tested this theory, they noted that "the more focused the [resource] poor were on the current round, the more they neglected (and borrowed away from) future rounds."[17] If they are correct, understanding the thwarting of prospective agency of those in poverty is essential, not just because it illuminates a common aspect of the experience of poverty but because this phenomenon might play a role in entrenching poverty.

II. WHY PROSPECTIVE AGENCY MATTERS

We are creatures who project ourselves into the future—our agency is temporally extended. We have the capacity not only to respond to our current desires but also to give our lives a structure over time that reflects our engagement with the world. This critical agential capacity underpins much of our engagement with our values, relationships, and life projects. We not only respond to our immediate needs but care about the wellbeing of those we love, embark on projects with others, and strive over time to live up to values that are important to us.[18] All of these dimensions of human

[15] Mullainathan and Shafir 2013; Haushofer and Fehr 2014.

[16] For a different interpretation of this data, see Carvalho and Wang 2016. I offer an interpretation of this data in Morton 2017.

[17] Shah, Mullainathan, and Shafir 2012, p. 684.

[18] Raz 2005.

agency require that we project ourselves into the future and respond to the reasons those ends give us, even when they might conflict with more immediate ends.

Prospective agency is more prevalent than we might initially think. It isn't limited to the kind of planning view of agency that philosophers like Michael Bratman have singled out, though that is an important version of it.[19] Many different types of ends require deliberation and action that extend into the future. Some of the ends in question might be ongoing, such as caring for a child or parent. Some might take the form of principles or values—honesty or compassion.[20] Others might be the sort of projects that might never come to fruition—fighting for racial justice or safeguarding the welfare of our community in the face of climate change. What matters is that, to engage with these ends fully, we must be able to prioritize them over other, more immediate ends.

We should not understand the above to mean that long-term ends are fixed or that their achievement is the only mark of successful agency. Sometimes, the best manifestation of our prospective agency involves responding to deviations from our plans, reconsidering the ends we were after, and adopting new ends.[21] What is critical is that our future-directed agential orientation underlies many ends that are important to us.

Consider, for example, Samuel Scheffler's discussion of the temporal dimension of our engagement with those we love and that which we value. When we invest in what we love and value, we project our agency forward and ground it in the past. He writes, "to lead one's life is to exercise one's agential powers to direct or shape one's future in ways that reflect one's aims, values, and desires."[22] For example, being a parent is an end that exhibits this structure. It often requires that we engage in immediate actions like cleaning crumbs from the car and feeding a screaming child, but it also structures how we act and think over time in a way that demands that we consider our child's future welfare. During the pandemic lockdown, I worried about letting my preschooler watch hours of television, even though doing so would have made our lives easier in the short term. In effect, I prioritized her long-term welfare over the immediate satisfaction of both of our desires. Of course, even good parents sometimes let their children watch too much television, but when we do so, we recognize that we are coming up short.

Beyond our individual projects and relationships, prospective agency is critical to assumptions of agency that underlie views of opportunity and responsibility in the

[19] Bratman 1987; 2007. Note also life plans in Rawls 1971, sec. 63.

[20] Thanks to Theron Pummer for helping me see this point.

[21] Millgram 2022.

[22] Scheffler 2021.

political sphere. For example, the principle of equal opportunity, understood as a fair competition for scarce goods, such as interesting, well-paid work, often assumes that citizens will develop the talents, skills, and knowledge required to enter that competition.[23] However, this requires a fair degree of future-oriented thinking from parents and young adults. The young person competing for a medical school spot must have done significant future-directed planning to be eligible for that position.

The same is true for many, though not all, cases of holding each other responsible in the political sphere.[24] We hold citizens accountable for paying their taxes, purchasing automobile insurance, and enrolling in a healthcare plan. The state also makes available opportunities to safeguard our future welfare that depend on planning ahead, such as saving in tax-deferred retirement accounts and healthcare savings accounts. In expecting us to live up to such duties and take advantage of such opportunities, the state assumes a robust capacity for future-directed agency.[25]

Of course, some people might choose not to engage in this kind of prospective agency. Why should it matter to them to be in a context in which such agency is possible? Three reasons can be offered. The first is that for various contingent reasons, we live in a social world in which that kind of agential architecture is closely tied to other goods that matter.[26] Having the choice to access those goods is important even if one decides not to pursue them. A second reason is that even those who choose not to engage in future-directed agency live in a society with many others who care about the goods that require prospective agency. And if we care about others being able to pursue flourishing lives, then we should care about supporting a context in which people can engage in prospective agency. The final reason is that if we live in a context that is inimical to prospective agency, our rejection of ends that require future-oriented planning might result from adaptive preferences.[27] Being in a context in which one can pursue such ends helps mitigate this possibility, even if one chooses not to do so.

My argument is not that we must project ourselves into the future or that such a capacity is essential to our agency or leading meaningful lives. The Buddhist monk who strives for mindfulness or the middle-aged philosopher who takes pleasure in atelic

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[23] Williams 1973, ch. 14.

[24] Bratman 1997.

[25] The degree to which our institutions require this kind of future-directed thinking varies from country to country.

[26] For a discussion of the match between agential architectures and environments, see Millgram 2022.

[27] Elster 2016. I make a version of this argument in Morton 2022.

activities are not counterexamples to the much more modest point I seek to make here.[28] What I aim to show in this section is that the capacity to project ourselves into the future and to prioritize it over our immediate needs is related to many things that human beings do, in fact, value, to how we organize our social and institutional life, and to the shape that many of our relationships and life projects take. Being in a context that thwarts that capacity is a barrier to central ways human beings engage with the world: our pursuit of meaningful projects, our relationships, and, in the political realm, opportunity, responsibility, and civic action.

III. AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO POVERTY

So far, I have noted that one feature common to a diversity of experiences of poverty is having one's prospective agency undermined. I have also argued that many ends, projects, and relationships we value require we exercise prospective agency. Therefore, poverty deprives people of an agential capacity that, for many, is critical to adequately responding to their ends, values, projects, and relationships. This, in part, is what makes poverty a normatively significant deprivation. This view of poverty as a kind of agential deprivation aligns with Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's capabilities account, which we will consider more fully later.[29] But it would be a mistake to equate the 'scarcity mindset' (as some have called this present-directed thinking prevalent among people living in poverty) with poverty. Instead, we should think about the agency of people living in poverty in an ecologically rich way that stresses the importance of context.

To do so, we must turn to a theoretical framework rooted in Herbert Simon's theory of bounded rationality and psychologist Gerd Gigerenzer's theory of ecological rationality.[30] Central to these accounts is the idea that humans reason and act in ways adapted to their context. Given that we are beings with limited cognitive capacity, the ecological theory tells us that it is rational for those habits of thinking and acting to be differentially and systemically shaped by that context.[31] On the ecological approach, we cannot think of agential capacities in isolation.

The proposed view of poverty that I put forward draws from this tradition.

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[28] Setiya 2018.

[29] Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2011.

[30] Simon 1955; Gigerenzer and Gaissmaier 2011.

[31] Morton 2017.

The Ecological Approach to Poverty: Being in poverty essentially involves being in a context in which a reasonable agent's prospective agency is systematically undermined.

What I'm proposing here is not an analysis of poverty that provides necessary and sufficient conditions. Poverty is a social condition the borders of which are unlikely to be amenable to this kind of joint carving. Instead, in the spirit of Peter Carruthers' conceptual pragmatism[32] and Sally Haslanger's ameliorative conceptual analysis,[33] I am proposing an approach to poverty the value of which is to be measured based on its usefulness to (1) recognizing a normatively significant commonality in the experience of poverty across different material contexts, (2) developing a deeper understanding of the agential deprivation at the heart of poverty, and (3) illuminating aspects of poverty that are not as salient on existing articulations of the concept.

Before we consider whether the view delivers on this promise, we need to get clear on the four fundamental notions it employs: (a) context, (b) reasonable agent, (c) prospective agency, and (d) systematicity.

A. Context

To see how the emphasis on context works, it's helpful to start with an analogy. Suppose you are trying to get work done at a coffee shop. You are typing away. Soon, your 4-year-old starts pulling on your shirt, asking for a snack. Another customer starts having a loud conversation on their phone. You struggle to overcome these impediments, and given your superior powers of concentration, you get a page written. Is this a good context in which to focus on work? The answer seems to clearly be no, even if you somehow have overcome the obstacles in your way. How we understand agency is deeply dependent on the agent's context—that is the central insight of the ecological approach.

What features of the context are relevant will depend on our purposes. In evaluating a study space, we will focus on the physical space, the norms that govern it, the resources available to patrons, and so on. Different features are relevant if we are thinking about a space where people can exercise or socialize. In the case of thinking about poverty through the lens of prospective agency, we will want to focus on more than the resources available to the agent. As I will detail in the next section, the organization of institutions in which the agent is embedded, the material environment, and the time and attention available to the agent will all be important factors.

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[32] Carruthers 1987.

[33] Haslanger 2006.

Emphasizing context instead of individual agents is critical in thinking about poverty. Popular discourse and policy discussions tend to emphasize individual examples of people who have overcome poverty as models for poverty eradication. Consider, for instance, the focus on grit and mindsets as qualities demonstrated by exemplary strivers.[34] The problem is that exceptional cases do not tell us much about the usual case. Just as we wouldn't want to design libraries by focusing on the person able to concentrate in the noisy coffee shop, we should not craft poverty policy by focusing on the exceptions. Yet, repeatedly, we craft poverty policy making assumptions about how people in poverty ought to be able to deliberate and plan, rather than about what would be reasonable to expect of agents given their contexts.

B. Reasonable Agent

The notion of reasonable I'm drawing from here is one developed by Kevin Tobia in the philosophy of law.[35] According to Tobia, people's judgment about what is reasonable is a hybrid notion combining statistical judgments—descriptive statements about what people do—and prescriptive judgments—about what people should do. Tobia offers experimental evidence showing that in various scenarios, people judge expectations of reasonableness in this way. In the coffee shop case above, we are not limited by what the agent does—they do get work done despite the obstacles—but by our expectations of what a reasonable person can be expected to do in such a context. Similarly, if our agent were in a quiet library and didn't feel like working, we wouldn't blame the context since we expect a reasonable agent to manage to get work done in that environment.

Psychological variation exists in how people respond to being in a context of impoverishment (or in one of abundance). Some people in poverty appear to transcend the limitations of an impoverished childhood, plan for the future, and succeed, but that doesn't mean they were not poor. Others are wealthy and obsess over every cent at the grocery store—they seem to exhibit a scarcity mindset—despite not needing to do so. Our expectations of what would be reasonable in a given context incorporate both statistical and normative considerations.

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[34] Duckworth 2016 and Dweck 2006.

[35] Tobia 2018, p. 293.

C. Prospective Agency

The most comprehensive elaboration of the agency involved in pursuing long-term goals is the planning theory, developed in a seminal book and a related series of papers and books by Michael Bratman. He argues that planning plays a critical role in our capacity to achieve goals that require us to extend our agency into the future.[36] Plans and plan-like attitudes provide a characteristic diachronic structure that supports agency over time.[37]

Some have pushed back on this notion of future-directed agency as the "middle management" approach. Candace Vogler suggests that "An enormous amount of human activity goes into making possible the conceiving and executing of a contemporary sort of personally rewarding, planned life. Very little of it is done by people who are conducting similarly rewarding planned lives. And this is no mere contingent truth. Not everyone can be management."[38] It is certainly true that only some get to engage in the carefully structured planning that one might think of as the paradigm of the planning agent. However, prospective agency involves much more than planning and is much more widespread.

An agent oriented toward the future plans but also cares, strives, aspires, and hopes. These attitudes are deeply interwoven with our capacity to project our agency into the future. Antti Kauppinen argues that even many present-directed activities that we find meaningful derive their meaning in part because of their temporally extended connections to other parts of our lives.[39] Some of these connections are not thwarted by a context of poverty, but many are. The parent who finds it meaningful to practice the ABCs with their child now does so in part because he is invested in a temporally extended project of helping his child develop and thrive. When barriers to educational opportunity get in the way of sending his child to college, it deprives that parent of a critical way of manifesting that form of meaning in his life. Thus, a barrier to prospective agency becomes a barrier to a kind of meaningfulness that prospective agency enables.

D. Systematicity

One insight of the ecological approach is that our agency is shaped by the repeated interaction between agents and their context. As Manuel Vargas emphasizes, "the

[36] Bratman 1987; 2007.

[37] Bratman 2007, p. 98.

[38] Vogler 2009, p. 107.

[39] Kauppinen 2021.

general tenor of [ecological] accounts emphasizes the ongoing situatedness of the formation and exercise of agency, and the distinctive incentives and pressures that emerge from that situatedness."[40] Systematic features of the context will generate the kind of pressures and incentives that shape agency. An agent who is systematically being prevented from exercising their planning capacities could find themselves in a one-off planning-conducive situation, but focusing on their agency in the one-off case would fail to account for the agency-shaping effect of their circumstances.[41] This point also helps us go some way to addressing the problem of individuating contextual features—those that play a systematic role in the agent's context are *prima facie* more critical than those with a short-term or one-off effect.

IV. CONTEXTS OF POVERTY

I will highlight three mechanisms often at play in poverty contexts to understand how an ecological approach can shift our thinking about poverty beyond focusing on individuals and their material deprivation. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but it helps us see why thinking of poverty through the lens of prospective agency is fruitful.

A. Attention and Time

Agents in poverty frequently confront practical problems that require them to use their limited resources efficiently to satisfy their immediate needs. Repeatedly confronting such problems shapes an agent's habits of deliberation to suit the nature of the problems she must solve.[42] This leads to rational pressure to prioritize short-term efficient deliberation, which, in turn, undermines the agent's future-directed action and deliberation.[43] Mullainathan and Shafir suggest that this is true because poverty reduces one's cognitive bandwidth.[44] Moreover, scarcity may also make present bias "rational" in so far as satisfying one's immediate need for food and shelter reasonably

[40] Vargas 2024, p. 50.

[41] Morton 2017.

[42] *Ibid.*

[43] Stress and anxiety might also contribute to the diminishment of an agent's capacity for long-term deliberation. These are not rational pressures, but they are psychological responses to being in a poverty context. Arguably, then, contexts of poverty undermine the agent's capacity to pursue and deliberate about long-term ends through multiple mechanisms.

[44] See Mullainathan and Shafir 2013.

leads an agent to focus on the short term, sometimes undercutting their long-term welfare.[45] We can easily see how this would happen in traditional cases of extreme material deprivation, where lack of food, water, and shelter is an issue.[46] Agents must focus on the immediate project of day-to-day survival, which takes time, effort, and deliberative attention away from prospective plans.

Material deprivation is not the only contextual factor that leads one's agency to be hijacked by having to think about the present. Onerous, means-tested welfare programs can also have this effect on agents. Beneficiaries might end up satisfying their basic needs, but doing so is cognitively taxing and requires constant attention. Similarly, the working poor often find their ability to plan for the long-term hampered by the uncertainty of how much and when they will be able to work. And those who live in precarious rental housing are constantly under the threat that they will be unhoused or forced to move, largely due to the laws governing housing in the United States. All these mechanisms are ways of commanding an agent's attention now, leaving little room for future-directed planning, even as these agents might have food and housing at the moment.

Focusing on future-directed goals requires not only bandwidth or attention but also time. Robert Goodin has argued for a notion of temporal justice.[47] 'Discretionary time,' Goodin suggests, is critical to our capacity to devote ourselves to our plans and projects. If we must work too many hours to secure a poverty-level income, then we have little time left for much else. Goodin notes that the inequality that already exists in discretionary time between the most disadvantaged and the most advantaged is an overlooked source of injustice.[48] It is also a source of inequalities in agents' ability to deliberate and pursue future-directed goals.

B. Scaffolds for Prospective Agency

Time and attention are no doubt important to prospective agency, but so are critical institutional and social factors that scaffold prospective agency. Bruce O'Neill

[45] Carvalho, Meier, and Wang 2016. See also: Haushofer and Fehr 2014; and Pepper and Nettle 2017.

[46] Some of this present-bias might also be seen in cases of addiction, mental illness, and some physical disabilities. The relationship between these conditions and poverty deserves more exploration than I can offer here. For a discussion of how disability challenges self-governed agency, see Purinton 2024.

[47] Goodin 2010.

[48] For the political importance of time, see Cohen 2018.

has conducted studies of the unhoused in Post-Communist Bucharest and finds, paradoxically, that many report boredom as one of the central ills afflicting them.[49] To be clear, they don't have resources just handed to them. They stand in long lines and struggle daily to find food and housing. But their problem is not just time or attention; those long lines offer plenty of time for thinking. However, that thinking feels idle without the scaffolds to long-term planning offered by jobs, education, and resources.

Radu, one of the unhoused people interviewed by O'Neill, cannot find work. He is too old to do manual labor and lacks the education required for other kinds of work.[50] Radu wants to be occupied with something other than securing his basic needs, but with no scaffolds for him to do so, he finds himself bored and depressed. Radu tells O'Neill, "My life is saturated with total boredom. I am bored with life…I no longer have desires… It's a situation in which you have nothing to do and nowhere to go. It makes you want a sudden death."[51]

Institutional and social scaffolds—work, education, and civic life—provide agents with articulated paths for future-directed agency. Without them, time and attention are idle. Agency is stifled; the future is bleak.

Other, less salient features of our context can also be critical to enabling prospective agency. For example, in her Tanner Lectures, Esther Duflo points out how many of us in wealthier countries can take for granted that water from the tap will not harm us.[52] Meanwhile, people in various parts of the developing world must deliberate how to decontaminate their water. Or return to the example of labor conditions. Many low-wage workers do not have access to retirement accounts or pensions, while others are offered a plethora of options through their employer.[53] In some wealthy countries, agents can depend on generous social security, while social security is non-existent in others. Our prospective agency can be encouraged (or thwarted) by the scaffolds available in our context.[54]

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[49] O'Neill 2014.

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 16–17.

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

[52] Duflo 2012.

[53] It is true that retirement accounts that are invested in the stock market might be subject to extreme volatility that does not safeguard one's future welfare. Pensions, from the perspective developed in this paper, are a better mechanism for securing prospective agency.

[54] Morton 2024.

C. Stability and Predictability

Unpredictability and instability are inevitable to some extent, but too much of it threatens our future-directed agency. Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* famously notes that without security, there is "no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society."[55] If one cannot count on the fruits of one's labor, there is little incentive to invest in the kind of ends that enrich our society. Hobbes was interested in political instability, which is one way that one's context can be inimical to prospective agency. And we can clearly see this in how war, political violence, and other sources of political instability make it difficult for agents to plan and project themselves into the future.

However, instability and unpredictability can also become deeply embedded into our institutional environments. We have already discussed how unpredictability in housing and labor threatens prospective agency, but we are also facing a climate crisis, which will accelerate the development of an environment less conducive to planning. We don't have to imagine an apocalyptic climate future to see the effects of such a climate on the prospective agency of people living in poverty already. A UN Climate report finds that those living in extreme poverty around the world are disproportionately more likely to be living in precarious locations where the threats of climate change are omnipresent—floodplains where they are regularly exposed to mudslides, drought-stricken areas where fires can quickly devastate their homes, and locations that are so hot that they are becoming inhospitable to human life.[56] If we take the ecological insight onboard, exposure to environmental unpredictability is itself impoverishing beyond a lack of resources. There are many other important questions here about climate justice and stability.[57] However, as instability becomes a more salient feature of our planet, we must think more carefully about poverty beyond resource allocation and take precarity seriously as a fundamental threat to agency.

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[55] Hobbes 1651, ch. 13.

[56] United Nations 2016.

[57] Meyer and Sanklecha 2014.

V. OBJECTIONS

The reader, no doubt, might have come up with a running list of counterexamples. For example, the pensioner living on the edge of subsistence but with an entirely predictable future ahead of him would show that the account hasn't offered necessary conditions.[58] Or a very wealthy person with many demanding duties that require them to focus on one immediate crisis after another seems to show that I haven't offered sufficient conditions.

The ecological approach has the resources to respond to these examples in so far as the context is fixed by whether it systematically undermines the prospective agency of the reasonable person. Let's think about the pensioner's context more fully. Their context is one of a limited guaranteed income that might not keep up with inflation, no prospects to improve their situation through work or other means, and no scaffolds to pursue goals other than the satisfaction of their immediate needs.[59] Even though they can engage in some form of planning, the scaffolds for prospective agency are unavailable in their context. They are still better off than those who must stand in long lines, fill out dozens of forms, or beg for food. There are degrees here.

The same can be said of the ultra-wealthy person who is focused on their day-to-day crises but will often have outsourced thinking about the future to wealth managers and other service professionals. Their context is one in which they lack time and attention for much else beyond immediate, urgent demands. Still, they have a high degree of institutional scaffolding to outsource their prospective agency. Furthermore, they have sufficient resources to change their context to be more suitable to prospective agency should they so choose—an option that is not available to those living in poverty.

Nonetheless, what drives these objections is the sense that the mechanisms I have identified here are not exclusive to the case of poverty, though they are magnified in that case. This is correct. To be clear, this is true of many accounts of poverty, most of which admit degrees of deprivation. People in poverty live on the edge of precarity—they are subject to the most extreme deprivation of prospective agency. They face many of the factors we have discussed—lack of time and attention, lack of scaffolds for long-term planning, and contextual instability—at the same time. The rest of us, however, are not immune from being subject to some of these very same factors.

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[58] Thanks to Gideon Rosen for this example.

[59] In addition, this objection is driven by a sense of elderhood as a stage of life in which one has little to look forward to but the monotony of old age. Surely, there are many older people who have plans and ambitions and see those thwarted by the meager resources thrown their way.

Consider, for example, insecurity in the labor market. The working poor are the most affected by the technological changes that have been allowing corporations to minimize labor costs, but many other people's lives have also been negatively impacted by corporations shifting the cost of 'inefficiencies' from employers to employees.[60] Consequently, the reasons for addressing this change in the labor market go beyond the imperative to alleviate poverty—they would improve many people's lives.[61]

Is this a problem for the view? It depends on what we are using the concept to do. If the hope is to find a unique factor that only those in poverty are subject to, then it is a serious problem. However, if a consequence of taking on this view is that it helps us illuminate structural features that disproportionately harm those in poverty but which harm many of the rest of us, too, then this is a feature, not a bug. It is still true that those in poverty live in contexts in which they are systematically and unrelentingly being thwarted from future-directed agency; recall the descriptions of those experiences in Section I. The same is not true of all of us. Nonetheless, many of the mechanisms that drive poverty today also harm the lives of those who are not in poverty.

VI. ASSESSING OTHER APPROACHES

The Ecological Approach to Poverty aims to capture a dimension of poverty that cuts across different material conditions. Unlike absolute deprivation accounts, it allows that poverty can exist even when someone has enough to eat and a roof over their head. However, there are several alternatives to absolute deprivation accounts that we haven't discussed. In this section, I discuss two alternatives and highlight their limitations. Note that even though I present my account as an alternative, they are not strictly speaking incompatible. One could accept either of these views and still think that the Ecological Approach to Poverty is getting at something quite important. One could see my view as one that develops the capabilities approach in a new direction. Nonetheless, in this section, I hope to show that these existing views haven't fully acknowledged the centrality of prospective agency to poverty.

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[60] Hacker 2019.

[61] For an argument for finding 'common ground' on being subject to precarity, see Standing 2011. Unlike Standing, I don't think this precarity is exclusive to labor, but a more general phenomenon that can be seen in the degradation of our healthcare, housing, climate, and community.

A. Relative Deprivation

In *The Wealth of Nations,* Adam Smith is taken to have advanced an argument against the absolute deprivation account. He writes:

> *A linen shirt ... is, strictly speaking, not a necessity of life. The Greeks and Romans lived, I suppose, very comfortably though they had no linen. But in the present times, through the greater part of Europe, a creditable day-labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote that disgraceful degree of poverty which, it is presumed, nobody can well fall into without extreme bad conduct."*[62]

In this passage, Smith suggests that we should reconceive what we count as 'basic needs' in a way that is sensitive to social context. For example, appearing in public without shame required access to different resources in 18th-century Britain than in ancient Greece. Consequently, the basic needs of someone in Britain will differ from those of someone in ancient Greece. This move would allow us to deal with some cases of poverty in wealthier countries. For example, in the 21st century, most people need a cell phone to apply for work, conduct basic financial transactions, and even access education. This wasn't true twenty-five years ago, when a cell phone was a luxury item.

Peter Townsend, an influential British sociologist of poverty, developed a relative deprivation account of poverty along the lines suggested by Smith's argument. Townsend's proposal was developed as a critique of the dominant approach in British policy that measured poverty by calculating how many pounds a British family would need to purchase the amount of food that would satisfy their caloric needs—an absolute scarcity account. Townsend, who had himself grown up in poverty, rejected this approach for being narrowly focused on physical deprivation. He argued that, despite having little nutritional value, tea ought to be a necessity because it is a significant way individuals participate in British society.[63] Citizens need to participate in their community's cultural and social life as much as they need food, water, and shelter. Townsend proposed that instead of calculating the level of poverty by focusing on what resources a British family needed to satisfy their basic caloric needs, we should count as poor families who have far below the average British family.

Though I agree with the attention to context inherent in this view, the most obvious problem with this approach is that it doesn't adequately distinguish inequality from

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[62] Smith 1776/1902, p. 53.

[63] Townsend 1962, p. 217.

poverty. If we were to wipe out 50% of the world's resources equally across the globe without changing people's socioeconomic position vis-à-vis each other, no one would have been made poorer.[64] Relative deprivation can certainly have psychological effects that might seem similar to those experienced by the poor,[65] but we must distinguish it from poverty because the phenomenon and its remedy are different. Take, for example, a person living in a socialist democratic country with a strong safety net but who feels that she has much less than others despite having access to food, housing, clean water, high-quality education, and healthcare. Unfortunately, unlike her neighbors, she cannot take yearly vacations to Spain or afford to buy a Tesla. We can recognize that this state of affairs psychologically affects her—she might feel shame or envy. We can even concede that in this community, she is justified in her belief that she enjoys a lesser social status because she cannot participate in all aspects of the life of her community. But she is not in a context of precarity.[66]

This is not to deny the point that severe inequality can aggravate poverty. When those with immense wealth control the institutions that wield power over the lives of the less well-off, those at the bottom are potentially subject to exploitative labor conditions that lead to lives of precarity. Marc Fleurbaey argues that "poverty can lead its victims to accept types of work or consumption they would refuse in other circumstances."[67] Where we find poverty, inequality and oppression are close at hand, but we ought not to conflate them.

B. The Capabilities Approach

The capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum has been the most influential approach to poverty. Sen criticizes both absolute and relative deprivation accounts of poverty.[68] He argues that the best account incorporates insights from both. Sen's account of poverty considers it a state of absolute deprivation, but because this deprivation is understood in terms of capabilities, it has the resources to accommodate the importance of social, cultural, and historical factors.

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[64] Sen 1983.

[65] Payne 2017.

[66] Compare this with Jiwei Ci's (2013) discussion of poverty. He argues that we should distinguish subsistence poverty, being unable to meet basic material needs, from status poverty, being marginalized in society.

[67] Fleurbaey 2007, p. 143.

[68] Sen 1983.

To have the capability to X is to be free to do X should one choose to do so. To be poor is to be deprived of specific basic capabilities such as the capability to be well-nourished, to be adequately sheltered, to participate in communal activities, and to be able to live without shame. This view stands in contrast to those that focus on resources (or the utility agents derive from these resources). For example, the capability to be well-nourished is one that the ascetic who chooses to fast has and that the starving person does not, even though both experience hunger. Furthermore, the view has the resources to account for social and political contexts. In the United States, where much of the infrastructure is built on the assumption that people have access to a vehicle, the capability to find employment and participate in the social life of one's community requires that one have a private vehicle. This is not the case in many other parts of the world, where the population is concentrated in dense urban centers with robust mass transportation.[69]

The capabilities account is unabashedly normative. As Sen writes, "What the capability perspective does in poverty analysis is to enhance the understanding of the nature and causes of poverty and deprivation by shifting primary attention away from *means* (and one particular means that is usually given exclusive attention, viz., income) to *ends* that people have reason to pursue, and, correspondingly, to the *freedoms* to be able to satisfy those ends."[70] Consequently, two vital tasks for the account are to specify which capabilities are critical, such that their absence constitutes poverty, and to outline how these capabilities should be balanced against each other.

Sen has been reluctant to insist on a definitive list of capabilities based on theoretical reasons. He writes, "To have such a fixed list, emanating entirely from pure theory, is to deny the possibility of fruitful public participation on what should be included and why."[71] Sen's ecumenical approach fits well with his rejection of the Rawlsian ideal theory paradigm.[72] The project of developing a political theory that can advance the goal of development across the globe ought to be one that a variety of political actors can take up.

Martha Nussbaum has been less reluctant to put forward a list of capabilities. Her list includes: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; being able to use one's senses, to imagine, and to reason; emotional development; practical reason; being able to live with others and to have the social bases for self-respect and dignity; being able to

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[69] *Ibid.*, p. 162.

[70] Sen 1999, p. 90.

[71] Sen 2005, p.158.

[72] Sen 2009.

connect to the animal and natural world; play; and political and material control over one's environment.[73] According to her account, all people are owed a threshold level of each of these ten capabilities. Why these and not others? Nussbaum sees this list as justified by a broadly Rawlsian methodology that gains its normative justification from the fact that the list of capabilities is a good candidate for a possible overlapping consensus among people with different conceptions of the good.

The justifications offered by Sen and Nussbaum are instructive in that they highlight that the capabilities approach is a *political* theory. Given the development goals that Sen and Nussbaum share, their theory offers an answer to the question of which capabilities are critical that is tightly dependent on a political process of justification. The capabilities approach cannot easily dispense with this underlying justification. It is a 'list view' that requires an answer to the question of what justifies the inclusion of some capabilities and not others. The underlying political justification must do the work to motivate the cohesiveness of the account it offers.

The account of poverty that I propose is compatible with the capabilities approach as a political theory, but unlike this view, it doesn't depend on accepting the corresponding theory of political justification. The Ecological Theory starts from a common experience of thwarted agency described by those in poverty and aims to capture it as an essential feature. The benefit of proceeding in this way is that it allows us to focus on a critical agential dimension independently of taking a position on the many ways of thinking about capabilities or their political justification. Another benefit is that it allows us to highlight a central commonality in the experiences of people living in different contexts, as captured by the Human Development Index (a measure often favored by capabilities theorists). The working poor in the United States have different capabilities than the unhoused in Bucharest, for instance, but they share an experience of a precarious future that is critical to notice. This is not to deny that the differences are important, but to acknowledge that there is something we gain from homing in on this common ground.

VII. TAKING PROSPECTIVE AGENCY SERIOUSLY

Thanks to the influence of research done in behavioral economics and social psychology, policymakers have embraced more complex ways of thinking about human agency in their policy recommendations.[74] There is more attention paid to cognitive

[73] Nussbaum 2011, pp. 33–34.

[74] For a report focused on poverty policy, see World Bank 2015. For a more recent report focused on economic precarity, see Ensign and Lopez 2024.

bandwidth, the importance of choice architecture, and the cognitive burdens imposed on agents. However, many of these accounts haven't been informed by a philosophical understanding of the importance of prospective agency to many valuable aspects of our lives. In this paper, I developed an approach that puts this normatively significant expression of our agency at its center. In this section, I discuss a few cases of poverty policy using the lens provided by the Ecological Approach.

First, let's turn to poverty alleviation programs that target the poor through means-testing. The argument for these programs is that they are a more efficient way of redistributing resources to only those who truly need them. Some have criticized the implementation of targeted programs for being demeaning to recipients, while others argue that they are not, in fact, effective because the bureaucratic machinery required to determine eligibility is itself expensive. I share these critiques, but the Ecological Approach to Poverty gives us another reason to reject such programs—they make participants poorer. Proving eligibility is often demanding both in terms of time and attention.

Consider, for example, the free school lunch program in the United States. In many school districts, only children whose families are eligible based on income will receive free or reduced lunch at school. Consequently, a child's eligibility depends on their families successfully navigating the bureaucratic system that certifies them as needing this kind of assistance. A change of status or unexpected extra income can push a family over the threshold, even if the change is temporary, thus resulting in a loss of eligibility. Some districts offer free school lunches for all. In that district, a child and their family do not have to worry about demonstrating need or losing eligibility. However, some affluent students do end up getting a free lunch. Nonetheless, the families in the universal school lunch district enjoy a benefit that the families in the eligibility district do not and, from the perspective of the Ecological Approach, are less poor.

Alternatively, consider labor policy. In the United States, there has been a movement to increase the minimum wage. This is a laudable goal, and arguably, it would have some effect on decreasing the poverty of the working poor. However, unless we also tackle labor stability, a higher minimum wage does not by itself address the sources of precarity that are inimical to the working poor's capacity to plan for the future. Historically, labor unions, for example, have focused on far more than hourly wages—demanding protections against unfair dismissal, minimum guaranteed hours, generous pensions, and other mechanisms of inducing stability—in seeking good working conditions.

Finally, let's briefly consider universal basic income. Erich Fromm argues that UBI would lead us to "shift from a psychology of scarcity to that of abundance."[75] There are merits to this position in so far as it avoids much of the bureaucratic morass that impoverishes those who most need aid. However, UBI is not a panacea, and the Ecological Approach can help us see why. When basic income is used as a substitute for the public provision of some basic goods, as is suggested by some libertarian-minded thinkers,[76] then we might in effect eliminate some of the scaffolding that enables future-directed agency. Part of what enables agents to pursue their long-term ends, prioritize their values and the wellbeing of those they love, and project themselves into the future are features of the context that go beyond income such as social support structures, housing and labor policy, and institutional stability.

UBI would increase the income of the working poor. However, it is an open question whether this would give them leverage to secure stability and security. For example, stable employment might not be available for someone with their education and skill set.[77] This is not to say that UBI would not alleviate poverty, but income itself might not be sufficient to 'buy' the kind of stability that allows for the thriving of prospective agency.[78] When we hold the Ecological Approach in view, we can articulate why certain institutional arrangements are better than others on this dimension even if they, in effect, transfer an equal amount of income to their recipients.

There is much more to be said about how this framework can help us think about the agency of people in poverty in a fruitful way. What these examples show is the importance of keeping in mind not just what resources an agent has at her disposal, but whether her social, institutional, and material context is a source of precarity that thwarts her Prospective Agency. This is particularly important when so much of our social policy targeted at the poor aims to enable people in poverty to plan their way out of poverty.

Human agents project their agency into the future. We invest in relationships, projects, and values. We seek to be agents whose actions over time reflect what we care about. However, our capacity to do so depends on being in contexts that allow us to deliberate, plan, and pursue those ends in the face of competing considerations. I have argued that to be poor is to be in a context that systematically prevents us from exercising this critical dimension of our agency.

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[75] Fromm 2013, p. 6.

[76] Friedman 2013.

[77] Lazar 2021.

[78] For a critique along these lines, see Anderson 2013, pp. 23–25.

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The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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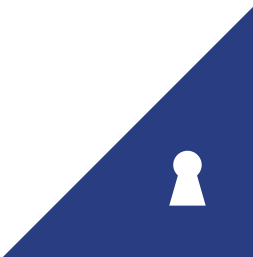
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