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The Foreigner, the Other, the Homeless: Challenges to the Golden Rule

Abstract

The twenty-first century has witnessed a rise in the number of global homeless. People are escaping their impoverished homelands with their families for security and peace in a country that promises a better life. The United States and countries in Europe are viewed as safe harbors but they resist adequate entry due to the increased numbers of people. The predominant perspective toward this phenomenon has been through political lens but it belies a deep-seated philosophical problem of humanity. This entails a convenience of interacting with strangers as classified groups and not persons of value. This paper examines the concept of "foreigner", as a particular kind of "other", the homeless. The Golden Rule alone is not sufficient to morally address this humanitarian crisis. The paper makes a case for a moral role of empathy that could reestablish the original ideal expressed by the Golden Rule.

Keywords: Foreigner, Other, Homeless, Golden Rule, Humanitarian crisis

It is fundamental to the human experience that we occupy positions of "foreigner", "guest", and "the other" under a variety of conditions. We may recall that such viewpoints were framed in the epic Homeric tale The Odyssey that focuses on themes of wandering, seeking hospitality of strangers in foreign lands. The stranger Odysseus encounters harsh and welcoming foreign harbors that elicit unique aspects of his character to adjust. This work serves as a literary precursor to contemporary issues of encountering "the other". Hospitality, the humane treatment of foreigners and guests, offers a normative that defines the quality of a civilization. This Greek virtue is challenged in contemporary global culture by the increased migration of people from foreign countries to host nations that intensify what it means to be "foreign", "other", and "homeless". In this essay, I will examine these concepts as they reflect a moral tension in our humanness, manifested among nationalists and refugees and asylum seekers who contribute to the phenomenon of global homelessness. These share a deep depersonalization due to the emphasis on physical relationships that easily form group identities. I argue that, in the light of our shared ontological human condition, we can find a bridge to hospitality through empathy and the golden rule.

1. Perspectives on Being Human: An Overview

Philosophers have long distinguished the metaphysical categories of appearance and reality and drawing on more refined dimensions of what it means to be human. Highlighting this are several accounts. Plato assigned status of the physical body as the vehicle of the rational soul through whose dialectical reasoning reasserts itself as the power to truth and reality. This relegates the physical world, including one's body, to a lesser ontological value that belies the intelligent essence of man. The Dialogues are replete with arguments that infer this valuation. Included in these works is the Socratic caution about misidentifying convenience for truth as often is the case when linear physical pleasures are readily attainable. Rather, he advises that if one cares about the well being of one's soul all goods will follow from therein. The inner life, self-

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knowledge, is a more arduous but honest pathway to what is just and true. Although the immediate satisfactions are reliably accessible, they have no sustainable good that deepens the understanding of a human life. In Descartes' Meditations he draws the mind-body distinction as two separate orders of existence and establishes the mind as the essential substance that thinks, doubts, wills, affirms and denies as mental predicates that define the quality of humanness. Reason is merely manifested in our physical behaviors as it occupies a privileged role in conducting, ordering the activities of the individual's choices but it, itself, cannot be empirically observed. Reminiscent of Plato's elevation of reason, mind over perceivable physical behaviors, Descartes, with the benefit of the rising sciences of his day, demarcates these realms of immaterial and material to signify the respective authorities of morals and the scientific. His influence, in spite of some weak logical and metaphysical steps, maintains the inaccessibility of knowing the inner life of a person and, as such, later philosophers address this in terms of an attitudinal shift from body of fact to person of value. Unless this shift in awareness occurs, we remain as shadows to one another which lead to objectification of individuals and groups.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century American philosopher, Josiah Royce, extends this distinction in his work *The Religious Aspects of Philosophy* using references to common life experiences. Royce maintains that our human existence is a selfish one that too readily has us infer from observing our neighbors' physical appearance as their real self. In order to transform this, one must have moral insight that the other is like myself. It is a moral insight since it is a deliberate choice to transfer the likeness of the other's joys and consternation to one's own inner life. By being present, the transition from the physicality of the other to their interior self has metaphysical implications.

The realization of one's neighbor, in the full sense of the word realization, is indeed the resolution to treat him as if he were real, that is, to treat him unselfishly. But this resolution belongs to the moment of insight. Passion may cloud the insight at the very next moment. It always does cloud the insight after no very long time. It is as impossible for us to avoid the illusion of selfishness in our daily lives, as to escape seeing through the illusion at the moment of insight. We see the reality of our neighbor, that is, we determine to treat him as we do ourselves. But we go back to daily action, and we feel the heat of hereditary passion, and we straightaway forget what we have seen. Our neighbor becomes obscured. He is once again a mere foreign power. He is unreal. We are again deluded and selfish. This conflict goes on and will go on as long as we live after the manner of men. Moments of insight, with their accompanying resolutions; long stretches of delusion and selfishness: This is our life.¹

Royce's analysis of our encounters with each other is only as things unless we empathize that our neighbor is as we are internally. He uses an analogy to underscore the proximity of the other to us since she is as close as our future self is to ourselves. Namely, «"the other" is a mass of states, of experiences, thoughts, and desires, just as real as thou art, no more but yet no less present to thy experience now than he is thy future self... Just as thy future is real, though not now thine, so thy neighbor is real, though his thoughts never are thy thoughts»². So it is through moral insight that pierces the veil of the "other" as not me, as a foreign object to me, into a realized self and by so doing metaphysically grounding my own realization as a self. We are inherently related to one another such that anyone's fullness of being a person is connected to being realized by another as such and reciprocate toward them. This

¹ Royce (1885), p. 161.

² Ivi, p. 160.

dynamic "in between" facilitation is emphasized as well by the nineteenth century theologian-philosopher Martin Buber's distinction of the I-it and the I-thou to signify our choice of attitudes in human existence³. In the I-it we have a relationship that is limited as we meet each other as physical bundles, as classified objects, reducible to characteristics. There is linearity about the other that blends in to the space and time environment. There is an objectification constructed that renders the viewer in control but paradoxically in isolation. In the I-thou we are forming intimate relationships with one another, a conscious valuing, an openness such that when we speak of the other as Thou, we speak of the whole being, there is no thing, no "it", but the engaged self of the "Thou", a whole being. This inescapable condition challenges us to find a complement, a fulfillment in whomever the other may be, for in our differences lies our commonality. By remaining as external traits to one another's view, we adopt an institutional and politically convenient set of classifications; homeless, refugees and asylum seekers. As such, by a stroke of a category mistake, persons are reduced to the summation of their physical, racial, gender, and religious traits.

Our human experiences are saturated with encounters with one another that appear seamless and innocuous. The environments have a range of acceptance, whether among students, colleagues, general citizenry, or friends and family; daily routines fix in on the familiar and expected behaviors. It is only when a disruption occurs that a shift to an attitude of concern emerges as a problem and a hypothesis is formulated. This is what John Dewey referred to as the movement from the prereflective experience that otherwise continues, the disruption is a disengagement, shifting to a critical level. This occurs when the ongoing, familiar experience demands our attention. In the context of our topic, this can readily arise when traveling to another culture, a sense of not belonging, lacking the common support connecting you to an identity. The foreignness and being perceived as "other" most often due to language barriers, physical appearance, racial and ethnic differences. One deliberates on how to adjust and moderate this sense of difference being perceived as foreign that has to be overcome. There is a choice of attitude; to remain as a visitor, a tourist, and accept the commodity view of oneself, or adopt an attitude of openness to be vulnerable and embrace the foreignness of the culture one is in. Travel outside of one's culture is an opportunity to experience the prejudice that we do not consciously acknowledge in ourselves toward others. It is a developmental exposure to the unfamiliar in beliefs and values that challenge preconceived notions of religion, politics and custom of living. But it submits the willing traveler to be viewed as "foreign", "other", "a stranger" of a culture until she chooses to return to her homeland. Those who are open may learn that it is one's own limitations that need to be examined, as much as they examine their host country. Here we find that prejudice is part of humanity but it should make us aware of our own discriminatory values. The valuation inherent in prejudice is appropriately stated in The Ontology of Prejudice by Jon Mills and Janusz A. Polanowski.

Either consciously or unconsciously, we choose that which is more personally desirable, thus we pass judgments through the exercise of our internally discriminatory operations of thought.... All judgments are imbued with value for valuation is a particular form of self-expression. Thus, valuation is prejudicial, for it involves a relation between difference and similarity that is necessarily self-referential. Therefore, all judgments presuppose self-valuation.⁴

³ Buber (2000).

⁴ Mills and Polanowski (1997), pp. 12-13.

The subjects of prejudice vary as does its moral severity. Some commonplace, amoral instances were discussed above regarding tourism and travel. However, a more distinctive case with moral implication is our attitude toward the homeless. They are in stark contrast to the mainstream of society and stand apart yet too close, so they are often ignored. Due to their unmistakable visibility, we essentially behave as if this "other" is invisible.

2. Homelessness: A Phenomenon of Otherness

The term "homelessness" encompasses various manifestations and causes of being without a home, a place that a person identifies as safe and private. It can be characterized as being unmoored, adrift without a relation that sustains their meaning. People who share the description have a history of nomadic living. Nomads were known to move about without intention to have an abode. Unlike the nomads, for more than forty years, this group has increased most often not by their own choosing, although there are some for whom this is a life style. For the USA and Western Europe, the major causes of being without a home is poverty, mental illness, single family mothers, and addiction. This is a transnational condition that epitomizes what is meant by "otherness" among a clearly defined group. This condition is compounded with the rise of people fleeing their homeland to escape war and poverty.

At this time when there appears to be more wealth in the world than ever, millions of people are suffering and, in some countries, they are dying, directly or indirectly from poverty. The increasing disparity between wealthy and the poor has crystallized the question what do we owe each other? There is ongoing discussion among philosophers about the right claims of the homeless and duties to fulfill this right by those individuals and institutions who are arguably duty bearers. The minimal count of global homeless is 100 million, and the material resources that can mitigate this through just distribution of goods is possible but has not been meted out. This failure has resulted in inhumane living conditions among the severely poor which underscores the coerciveness of their condition, thereby preempting any notion of free choice. So, for those who escape severe conditions in their countries have no choice but to do what is necessary for the survival of their family. Philosopher James Rachels states that «about 18,000 children, many under the age of 5 years old, die each day from problems related to malnutrition; a total of six and a half million human beings losing their life each year due to causes related to poverty³⁵. The population most affected by such conditions lives in underdeveloped and developing countries. This disparity not only contrasts with people in the world who may have exceeded their satisfaction of basic needs, but also raises the question of whether this inequality is morally justifiable. In understanding this question, two aspects must be focused on in this section. It would be instructive to consider (a) the causes of global homelessness, and (b) moral rights of the global poor. The persistent circumstances of global homelessness was expanded by the 2015 refugee and asylum seekers fleeing war-torn countries and extreme poverty.

The persistent circumstances of global homelessness are sufficient moral grounds to invoke the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights. A Declaration that repeatedly is unfulfilled. It states:

⁵ Rachels and Rachels (2015), p. 64.

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Everyone.... has the right to social security' (Article 22), 'Everyone has the right to work...and to protection against unemployment' (Article 23), and 'Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family' (Article 25). This statement 'places the highest priority on the rehabilitation of expelled and homeless people who have been displaced by natural or human-made catastrophes. All countries have a duty to cooperate fully in order to guarantee that such displaced people are allowed to return to their homes and given the right to enjoy properties without interference'.⁶

The fulfillment of this right is foundational to securing other rights. For this reason, homelessness diminishes human value. It obfuscates notions of opportunity one can otherwise access to improve their life. This opportunity is sought in other countries by refugees and asylum seekers from Syria, Iran, and Iraq. They targeted most notably Italy, Germany, and Sweden as destinations; but the port of entry, Greece and Italy served as corridors to the northern countries. In the United States, the influx of people from Central America via Mexico are escaping governments that cannot protect them from poverty and gang violence. Germany, Hungary, and Sweden received the bulk of applications across the EU. Germany, however, received more than six times as many asylum seekers as France and UK⁷. Both the EU and USA are regions being sought for security and survival, and raise fear of the impact these foreigners will have on their respective cultures. These respective countries closed borders off in order to insulate their national identity. President Trump's solution to prevent what he referred to as criminals and rapists from entering the USA illegally is the construction of a wall along the southern border. The immigration agents are overwhelmed with the volume of refugees seeking asylum status that detention areas are set up but insufficient space forces people to transitional tents under a bridge between the USA and Mexico. In an effort to diminish the numbers of migrants using Mexico as a corridor to the USA, President Trump threatened tariffs on goods from Mexico. Mexico agreed to strengthen their immigration enforcement and also let migrants wait for US asylum on its side of the border.

This mobilization of people across land and sea into other countries expands the complexity of homelessness. They are not only deprived of housing in their own local communities but they are denied a life with a future plan and suffer the loss of family relationships at home. Such conditions intensify the human travesty. It underscores the foreignness of otherness and perhaps more poignantly underscores those repelling features found in our local homeless populations. But it is not only larger but also literally a foreign population. Every country has its own (local) homeless whose plight signals their "nonpersonhood". They are seen as detached from the onlookers' values and connected purpose. The meaningfulness of their existence is called into question by the very fact that their agency apparently fails to raise them above their condition. They are more readily viewed as objects on a landscape. The global homeless, by contrast, are constructing a meaningful life in a host's land which poses an added dimension of being homeless, one that incurs a deeper resentment, a deeper sense of "not one of us". One reason is the threat factor; competing for one's employment, social resources, medical, educational, cultural or financial subsidy, and the proximity of living in one's neighborhood. There is also an element of compassion fatigue; there is a felt limit to what one ought do to save another life; should citizens be required to not only extend their charity but risk transforming their identity as a nation?

⁶ United Nations (1948).

⁷ Asylum Seekers (2016).

The familiar objection to assisting others is often raised on the grounds of their distance and lack of familiarity to donors. Some who make this argument follow it up by arguing for beneficence locally, and then the charitable contribution can be observed by the difference it makes. Yet, an objection is still raised when people who were distant are now among us or want to be among us; where efforts made to relieve their plight can be monitored, the responses are mixed. It is indisputable that both the EU and the USA have admitted some of the newly displaced, but it's also true that thousands who await processing are detained in temporary shelters that were designed for short transitional stays. Many remain for weeks in overcrowded and inhumane spaces. This expresses its own unspoken response of resistance to admitting more to refugee status. The efforts made at hospitality appear to have failed when one considers whether the efforts are in balance against the grave risks desperate people undertook to reach the so-called land of "milk and honey" to heal their broken lives.

3. Moral Rights of the Global Poor

It is fundamental to the pursuit of a full human life that a person have basic needs met: food, water, clothing, shelter, and security. Poverty denies people the material goods and security that would grant opportunities to engage their capabilities to the fullest. The inequalities between the wealthy and the poor exceeds an income differential. The qualities and range of choices make for opposing worldviews. For the poor and homeless who are without economic goods, their liberties are narrowed as are their lives. The harm that poverty inflicts violates the general understanding of the rights owed to human beings qua human being. This moral status of the poor continues to be either overlooked, unwelcomed, or resisted by institutions. Henry Shue emphasized that the needs of subsistence and security should be considered rights. Without these being fulfilled by society, Shue argued, «it paralyzes a person, preventing her or him from exercising any other rights...Social arrangements must be established that will bring assistance to those confronted by forces that they themselves cannot handle⁸. The homeless are repeatedly forced to live in a manner that contravenes their moral personhood. It is unjustifiable to have harms inflicted on them that render their futures vapid and hallow. "The right to security protects people from assaults which would interrupt their plans or force them to act in ways unbecoming themselves. Without security, choices of what to do, where to live, how to live, become drastically curtailed^{»9}. By satisfying subsistence rights, the poor have conditions available for realizing their hopes and to optimize their potential while maintaining human dignity. The claim rights for subsistence is echoed throughout decades and since this right goes unmet, the inequality persists.

The inequality is a way of life in the Global South countries such that Diana Tietjens Meyers refers to it as countries characterized as LDDWs, Large Deficit of Decent Work¹⁰. Citizens are motivated to risk everything to enter other countries, usually in the Global North as undocumented migrants. The poverty is so severe that they opt for the voyage abroad, a motivation that Meyers views as coerciveness of poverty. When the depth of impoverished conditions is systemic this entails a violation of a human right, yet international law reserves such a violation to when a government inflicts terror or harm on citizens. Clearly deprivation people endure without

⁸ Shue (1980), p. 26.

⁹ Abbarno (1999), p. 188.

¹⁰ Meyers (2014), p. 68.

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alternatives provided in their homelands or from external aid, victims of such find it necessary to seek a secure location. Meyers cites the position by James Hathaway that defends human rights in refugee jurisprudence on the grounds that poverty is a form of persecution. «For Hathaway, then, sustained or systemic denial of the right to earn one's living that is, protracted forced unemployment, is a form of persecution»¹¹.

So, certain groups in LDDW countries are targeted as officially mandated to be wrongfully excluded from economic opportunities. The political and economic elements are present to show there is justified claim of persecution. Citizens of these countries exercise unique choices due to the coercive conditions they are forced to live under. Meyer argues that:

being subjected to severe poverty in an LDDW economy sets up a coercive choice situation, one in which undocumented immigration may well be the least hazardous option, a more lenient policy seems appropriate. Indeed it is arguably obligatory for destination states to explore the feasibility of gauging their responses to individual undocumented immigrants to the severity of the poverty and the gravity of the harms correlated with that poverty that the individual is trying to leave behind.¹²

That a person should be accorded dignity and respect is an uncontroversial axiom. It is the multiple ways that this is ignored and even made systemic, afflicting profound harms that endure forever, that places it among the worse moral wrongs and a failure to fulfill the subsistence rights of a vulnerable class. The historical development of global homelessness underscores that the negative duties human beings have toward the poor, taking measures that prevent greater harm than their condition already causes, are not fulfilled. The condition morally eviscerates poor people, forcing them to live with the scorn and rebuke of their fellow citizens who look at them as strange and denigrate them. Over time they do not expect to be treated with respect, they remain supplicants for hospitality. For the wealthier nations' failure to acknowledge their duty to the human rights claims of the poor diminishes themselves as well as denies full moral standing to the poor.

4. Empathy and The Golden Rule: What We Owe Each Other

The question of what we ought to do for another person(s) arises infrequently when circumstances are unproblematic. However, whenever we encounter images of communities ravaged by natural disasters in foreign lands, malnourished children due to poverty, or cruelty and immanent harm, political oppression, one is moved toward resolvable action. There are two moral principles that offer moral responses to the humanitarian crisis presented here: the Golden Rule, and empathy. After analysis of the two, empathy in consort with the Golden Rule offers the moral groundwork for a morally justified intervention.

The Golden Rule has a long history of application in diverse cultures when engaging each other. The Golden Rule, whether expressed as «treat others as you would wish to be treated», or «do unto others as you would have them do unto you», or in any of the other several ways in which it has been stated, is a frequent expression of universal morality. It is held as the core of human relationships since it entails equity in the action of what one does for the other. The expectation is that to whom this act is done, it will be returned. So it expresses a mutual responsibility between people. This rule of reciprocity is a bridge that surmounts the differences between people whether cultural

¹¹ Ivi, p. 77.

¹² Ivi, p. 86.

or political. It should be acknowledged that the first maxim of Kant's categorical imperative directs this universal guide as well, «Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law of nature». However, the Categorical Imperative functions by a law of reason and not an empirical rule such as the Golden Rule. A full discussion of this controversy is more suited to a separate study. One difference relevant here is that the Golden Rule is an acknowledgement of one's own biases as well, so it is not a pure formal moral law: thus the expression «acting toward others as I desire you would act toward me». Such biases could have our best interests enacted on others and thereby direct that they be the recipients of what we value and extend it. Namely, it states how we ought to treat others and what we desire for ourselves. This is a positive formulation of the Rule from which we can encourage truth telling, loyalty, and beneficence for example. So it would be inconsistent for one to follow a rule that directs the agent against his interests. For example «deny shelter and security to those poor who are not from desirable countries», or «who lack preferred skills» or «who are of a different religion». These assume that the interests expressed are those I am willing to be subjected to. One may argue that such a rule itself does not prevent cruelty since there may be a limitation to what the agent foresees as reciprocal action. That is, the rule may be formulaic and lacking sufficient sensibility or immanence to consider that what is initiated could have deleterious repercussions. So given this understanding of the Golden Rule, I argue that it would be best complemented by the role of sentiments, namely, empathy that operates from a relational experience with those about whom one is making life-altering judgments.

Earlier Royce's moral insight was presented as a recognition that what we appear to be to one another may be a socially rehearsed method of relating, communicating while keeping one's distance. There are behavioral and linguistic means of constructing this distance. The Global Homeless, by classification into refugee or asylum seeker status, are isolated and objectified by their physical appearance as mobilized foreigners. It is not merely the external traits that shield the subjectivity of our fellow human beings but the legal definitions that make some services accessible to them and others restricted. For example, the refugee arrival figures from the U.S. State Department and asylum data from the Department of Homeland Security's 2015 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, describes and explains the characteristic of the U.S. refugees and asylum populations, including the top states for resettled refugees, some of whom have become lawful residents. This is an institutional approach to a human problem, one that requires human intervention of a moral kind. The moral role of empathy enacts the interpersonal between people, being aware that the other is like me and I like them arouses a concern to take action. Empathy means taking on the subjective perspective of the "other" person. It could be unreflective, automatic and on occasion deliberate, as a reflective full effort. The empathetic person reflects on the state of mind of the other, imagines how things are (were or will be) for that person and imagine how the empathizer herself would think or feel if she was in their shoes and situation¹³. Some believe that «empathy is derived from mirror neurons that helps substantiate evolutionary continuity in empathic feeling¹⁴. Being overly exposed to people in distress, for example the overwhelming number of displaced people fleeing to foreign lands for processing and the hope of security, may be received at a surface

¹³ Bennett and Graham (2014), p. 122.

¹⁴ Hoffman (2014), p. 76.

level of empathy. A term called by Kaplan¹⁵ as "empty empathy". The images are so frequent that only fleeting responses arise and are cancelled by the next that blunts motivation to do more to help¹⁶. Observing the homeless, what Kaplan refers to as "witnessing empathy", wherein one personally wants for the other what she would want for herself. This enacts empathy for their situation: one is trying to act in the best interest of the other. Royce's moral insight enlivens and deepens one's encounter to a personal level. The anxiety, the fear and desperation of losing one's intimate relationships, is imagined as one's own experience. This empathic trade of inner places transcends the governmental "either or" determined group solutions. A tidy solution for an untidy and complicated human problem. It prompts the question, have I done enough to thwart the harm or inequality? Should their background be included in discussion as elements for equitable treatment of them? Their origins from war, oppression, disease, fear of death ought to strike a moral chord of urgency to help.

One objection to such an empathic transference to aid others arises out of tribal thinking. That the feelings expressed for the plight of another is more likely to spring from common values. Whether the homelessness population is from a shared culture or migrant groups, it is claimed empathy will not enact an intervention and aid an outside group. Yet, as strong as a shared value bond is, there are examples of just such actions of people so moved that they rise above the status quo of expected prejudice to the point of great expense and risking their lives. Consider the following: The celebrated Biblical example of the Good Samaritan. The Samarians and the Jewish people hated one another; the Samarians were viewed as unclean and were avoided unless a thorough cleansing would be required upon contact. A Jewish man was beaten and robbed of his possessions and cast to the side of the road. A passerby, a Jewish priest, ignored his suffering. A Samarian stopped and cared for the man, bringing him to an Inn and where he asked that his care continue at the Samarian's expense. Finally, the stark example during WWII, in the Village of LeChambon in Southeastern France, where a Christian sect of Huguenots lived, saved 6,000 people, most of whom were Jewish children whose parents were killed in the death camps of Central Europe. "They sheltered the refugees in their own homes and various houses they established for them¹⁷. There was a collective effort of empathy enacted by people whose compassion blinded them to the differences of the others who they saved.

We need a reimagining of what is the same in our humanity than what drives our differences in religion, politics, race, and geography. The expanded exposure of global citizens through the internet affords an opportunity never available before, namely, the powerful images of others deprived of basic rights. We can be responsible "empathy witnesses" of human deprivation and respond to the injustices by supporting humane policies of hospitality. Empathy infused into the Golden Rule gives us a way to listen, to see, to focus, to listen and act on what is best in us to alleviate avoidable suffering of the global homeless.

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¹⁵ Ivi, p. 81.

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