

## REVIEWS

### The Hope of the Poor: Philosophy, Religion and Economic Development

**Gordon Graham**

United Kingdom: Imprint Academic (IPS), 2023 (230 pages)

The poor want resources—but should they want them at the risk of loss of dignity, rootlessness, anomie, or a turn to greed? This is the concern that animates *The Hope of the Poor*, written by Gordon Graham. This book is about the intersection of economic development and philosophy: wealth may help, it argues, but wealth is at best a means to a good life and at worst a distraction or an impediment to it. “Effective altruism,” being focused on improving access to material resources and on doing so efficiently, is thus doubly instrumental and so less helpful than it seems.

The poor should hope for what everyone else hopes for: a valued and meaningful life and a life with the sort of integrity that lends it meaning. For this, a religious attitude is essential because religious rituals show that all lives, regardless of resources, are valuable. This means a life in relationships, because in community we come to understand ourselves (as children of our parents, as members of a profession). A good life is, according to the author, the “pursuit of purposeful, self-directed activity within a community” (199). This is subject to particularities of time, place, and context; relationships are not quantitative concepts that can be examined by an outsider. I can count the hours I spend with my friends and the years of my marriage, but numbers rarely capture what is interesting.

But international aid agencies rely on numbers—partly to avoid the question: What is a good life? It is not a value-neutral question. International aid agencies have embraced a neo-Baconian vision of detached observation and experimentation. Their aim is to improve our situation (biological or social) without any attachment to relationships, environment, or culture.

Graham argues that “helping the poor” is neo-Baconian in that it is both top-down (focused on outside help) and reductive (defining a person by her material resources). Instead, we should aim at helping the poor live full lives. Graham resists being precise, but this is consistent with his perspective that “a full life” has to be defined within time, place, and context. A universal, precise definition of “full life” would tempt us to provide others with a prepackaged version while denying them their own agency. Since self-directed activity is a constitutive part of a good life, the effort would be self-defeating.

Graham first explains how not to think about the hope of the poor. After a lengthy discussion (and dismissal) of Nietzsche and utilitarianism, chapter 1 lays out Kant’s account of rational agency to justify human equality and distinctiveness. Plato, Hume, Marx, and Nietzsche on theory versus practice are discussed extensively, but Graham prefers Kant’s autonomous practical reason, perhaps partly because (he believes) religion is not so much about creeds as about rituals.

Chapter 2 dismantles the utilitarian focus on pleasure and dismisses the pursuit of excellence as antiegalitarian. It is not obvious here that Graham has been fair. Arguably, Aristotelian excellence is not Olympic gold, but the dynamic balance between defect and excess, attained by thoughtfully building one’s life to consistently choose this balance. Relationships, on the other hand, are a worthy object of ordinary people’s hope, if nothing else because in them we see character traits, such as constancy or capriciousness, that are present in everyone’s life.

Building toward thinking about poverty and its relief, chapter 3 shifts to the world we live in, both in the biological and social senses. Here we need practical reason rather than technology, a picture of world rather than a theory. Is the universe benign, hostile, or indifferent? he asks. After considering Sisyphus, Prometheus, Genesis, geocentrism, and anthropocentrism, Graham concludes that none of this matters: We still face the task of “the relief of man’s estate,” per Francis Bacon. Neo-Baconianism, Graham explains, abandoned Bacon’s theology and made science its creed, with the improvement of the human condition proposed as salvation.

Gross domestic product (GDP), purchasing power parity, population numbers, poverty lines, averages, and other neo-Baconian shibboleths are torpedoed in chapter 4. What is the alternative? How else shall we determine whether people are better off? Introductory macroeconomics textbooks mention that, while GDP per capita is not the same thing as human well-being, the two are correlated. Graham points out that we often forget that correlation is not identity, but does not provide an alternative way of determining the fullness of a person’s life.

Chapter 5 points out that international aid agencies are riddled with conflicts of interest and, even with the best of intentions, make aid decisions from the top down. They propose economic growth as a desirable goal, but there are diminishing returns to income. There are goods that money cannot buy. Too much wealth can impoverish one's social relations and produce stress and despair. What is the alternative? The answer lies in relationships.

This points to John Macmurray's argument that personal relationships are foundational to the self. Chapter 6 revisits Hume's neo-Baconian vision, inadequate because it focuses on numbers and inspires top-development programs. Should we ask people for their opinion instead? No, because surveys reduce people to numbers. What is the alternative? Graham brings up infants and the dead (who cannot reason for themselves but for whom others have the duty to reason). The implication is that there is a third way between telling people what they should want and asking them what they want. As a person, sometimes, someone else does my thinking for me—in a community, some decisions are made by people who care for me (or by my cultural milieu), rather than by the individualist atom. The distinction between communally mediated practical reason and paternalism by outsiders is a subtle one.

Chapter 7 explores the many ways in which a human life is a very rich thing: we live in time and experience it, but more: we structure it. We are not merely "thrown" into the world (per Heidegger), we are "called" to a social role. Work is more than how we pay for our leisure: It is how we exercise our human agency. Poverty is not merely low GDP per capita: It is weak institutions, broken politics, and ineffective rule of law. Progress is not the imposition of an outside theoretical scheme, but culturally motivated reform. Life may be short or long, but its fullness depends on being treated with dignity by others. The meaning of life is more than a series of meaningful experiences; religion is not an opiate but how we rescue our time from its mere passing. The conclusion is that "the best hope for a human life lies in ... living purposefully and productively within a way of life that is firmly grounded in community," which he calls "vocational dwelling" (192).

This book covers much ground but cannot cover each topic thoroughly, and sometimes the connection with the main theme is less than evident. One weakness of the book is how often a major controversy is brought up at length but dismissed, how every possible quibble is acknowledged before the argument is stated, and how many important points are hinted at rather than filled in. The book leads with objections (e.g., Nietzsche's disbelief in equality or Hume's scientific vision) and only lays out his own argument in (some) detail in the last chapter while indulging in asides and detours. This makes for difficult reading! Graham's criticisms of economic statistics are not new; the statistics themselves (such as purchasing power parity measures of GDP) are sometimes mischaracterized. Besides two paragraphs on pages 189–90, there are no examples of Graham's preferred way of helping the poor.

The book's conclusion is that the hope of the poor "is simply the same as the hope of every human being" (211). Is not the material poverty of the poor worth worrying about? To take non-Baconian examples: Deuteronomy enjoins against exploiting the poor; Samuel's mother Hannah sings of how God lifts up the poor, and Nathan compares David's crime to stealing from the poor. There are more than a hundred references to the poor in the Sapiential books. Jesus brings glad tidings to the poor, points out the distress of Lazarus, and asks the rich young man to give his possessions away to the poor; and Paul, in accordance with a request by Peter, James, and John, frequently takes up a collection for the poor.

Yet the book baldly asserts that "material poverty in itself does not generate an obligation to assist" (93). Maybe this is mere hyperbole. If the point of the book is that we cannot worry about material poverty while ignoring everything else that makes life worthwhile, it is a point well taken.

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**Danish Capitalism in the 20th Century: A Business History  
of an Innovistic Mixed Economy**  
**Stefan Kirkegaard Sløk-Madsen**  
Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022 (204 pages)

One of the enduring mysteries of international economics is the variation in growth and prosperity across nations at a point in time, and the variation in a single nation over time. Simplistically, it would appear that differences should not persist, since whatever "works" for one nation can be copied by another. And it seems obvious that poor nations "should" grow faster, in the earlier part of their development path, as the accumulation of capital rapidly increases the marginal product of labor.

That prediction, or perhaps intuition, has been consistently falsified by empirical experience. The standard mechanical explanations—natural resource factor endowments, human capital, and physical infrastructure such as access to power and transportation networks—do seem to matter, but they matter (much) less than a mechanical viewpoint might predict.

Another possibility, one that has been much more in vogue in the past three decades, is the power of institutions, culture, and ideas. Famously, after winning the 1993 Nobel Prize in Economics, Douglass North did the usual world tour of developing countries. When asked what policies or government actions might spur growth, North would always pretend to think, and then say, "Well, the first thing you'll need is a different history." It is true enough that the "institutions" or "ideas"