

Who Is Responsible for Global Poverty?

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All unattributed quotes are from Pogge (2005).

1. Background

Today there are probably substantially more than 600m people living on under \$1.90 a day at purchasing power parity (PPP) exchange rates using 2011 prices (FT Reporters 2020).

‘The common assumption [...] is that reducing severe poverty abroad at the expense of our own affluence would be generous on our part, not something we owe, and that our failure to do this is thus at most a lack of generosity that does not make us morally responsible for the continued deprivation of the poor’ (Pogge 2005, p. 2).

1.1. Two perspectives on poverty-caused harms

needs-based: We citizens of affluent countries have a positive duty to meet needs.

harm-based: We have a negative duty not to harm.

1.2. Libertarians

‘Libertarianism is a family of views in political philosophy. [...] Libertarians strongly value individual freedom and see this as justifying strong protections for individual freedom. [...] Libertarians usually see the kind of large-scale, coercive wealth redistribution in which contemporary welfare states engage as involving unjustified coercion’ (van der Vossen 2019).

2. Pogge’s Argument

Key premise: a just institutional order cannot ‘foreseeably reproduce avoidable human rights deficits on a massive scale’.

Observation: ‘If the rich countries scrapped their protectionist barriers against imports from poor countries, the populations of the latter would benefit greatly: hundreds of millions would escape unemployment, wage levels would rise substantially, and incoming export revenues would be higher by hundreds of billions of dollars each year.’

1. ‘Global institutional arrangements are causally implicated in the reproduction of massive severe poverty.’
2. ‘Governments of [...] affluent countries bear primary responsibility for these global institutional arrangements and can foresee their detrimental effects.’

3. ‘there is a feasible institutional alternative under which such severe and extensive poverty would not persist’
4. ‘many citizens of [...] affluent countries bear responsibility for the global institutional arrangements their governments have negotiated in their names.’

Conclusion: ‘the citizens and governments of the affluent countries, in collusion with the ruling elites of many poor countries, are harming the global poor by imposing an unjust institutional order upon them’ (Pogge 2005, p. 59).

3. Objection

Key premise: ‘We [could] hypothesize about the distributive outcomes that would be likely to arise under [a] fair international order and then compare these outcomes with the ones associated with the actual international order. The gap between the two sets of outcomes tells us the degree of responsibility of the actual order for the outcomes it is associated with’ (Patten 2005, p. 23).

Observation: ‘even in a fair international environment there is no guarantee that the policies needed to fight poverty will be introduced domestically ... even fairly democratic countries, operating under an international set of rules that have been shaped for their own advantage, can routinely fail to enact policies designed to help

their poorest and most marginalized citizens' (Patten 2005, pp. 23–4).

3.1. Dilemma

After reforming the international system, would the affluent have absolved themselves of complicity in the fate of the poor?

If a proponent of Pogge's view answers no, she faces standard objections to libertarianism.

If a proponent of Pogge's view answers yes, she seems to abandoning a needs-based, rather than (as claimed) an exclusively harm-based, perspective.

4. Conclusion

As far as we have seen,
Pogge is right that
from weak assumptions about duties not to harm
(assumptions so weak even a Libertarian
would accept them)
it is possible to derive
a radical conclusion about redistribution.

But unless you hold that 'property and other rights of the privileged should [...] be regarded as so absolute as to override a duty to perform easy rescues', you cannot deny that some duty to act arises from the needs of those in extreme poverty.

References

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