Alex Hovakimyan

Lauren Gordon

EWRT D002

27 February 2023

The Social And Moral Perspective On Reparations

Giorno Giovanni was born in 1973, an only child, near Naples, Italy, the home of Pizza. His father, Luca Giovanni, was a gangster. As a gangster, Luca peddled cocaine to children. Whilst Giorno did not condone his father's actions, he could not deny that he benefited from his father's illegal trade. After all, the food that fed him, the warm bed he slept in and the roof over his head were all paid for by the life-destroying addiction of young 14 year old boys like himself. Decades later, Luca dies in a car accident and Giorno inherits his father's estate. The boys his father dealt drugs to are long gone, either dead from overdosing or homeless and unrecognizable. What is Giorno obligated to do? Should he help similar victims of drugs with his newfound wealth or carry on with life? This is precisely the question Ta Nehisi Coates asks of White people in his essay "The Case for Reparations". In this essay, Coates spends a great deal of time describing the theft black people have faced in the hands of White America during and after slavery. A few examples he delves into are America's hundreds of years of Black enslavement, the infamous redlining practice of banks in the 1900s, and individual instances of Black people's wealth being stolen by White people during Jim Crow. In particular, he uses the personal anecdote of Clyde Ross to demonstrate the housing discrimination that he and other Black people faced due to predatory lending practices and its long term consequences. He argues that because of this theft, Black people deserve a formal, government-sanctioned study of potential means of reparations through the passing of the HR-40 Bill in Congress. While I agree with Coates that, on an individual level, a victim has a right to receive reparations from the perpetrator, I am not sure if this holds true for intergenerational conflict. Therefore, in this inquiry paper, I will explore the following question: Does a person have the social and/or moral responsibility of paying their ancestor's debts?

# THE ESTATES DEBTS MIGHT GO UNPAID

I'll first examine if paying reparations to Black people adheres to the principles of social responsibility as per the status quo. For instance, do Americans inherit the debt of, say, their parents when they pass away? According to Capital One, a bank holding company, "The [deceased] person’s estate—the property they owned—is responsible for their remaining debt… If the estate doesn’t have enough money, the estate’s debts might go unpaid". In other words, the debt is paid off with what the deceased person had owned, and if their estate can't cover it, then the debt is forgiven. If we were to follow this same practice in our talk of reparations to Black Americans, that would mean paying America's debt off with things directly originating from enslavers, like a grandfather clock or an ottoman. There is no way, however, that antiques could ever repay the full debt of slavery and Jim Crow to Black Americans. Furthermore, there are much more elusive things White Americans have received from their ancestors' "estate", like general wealth from the free labor of Black Americans. How exactly could we quantify and repay Black Americans for this? There is no easy answer.

# THE DIFFERENCE IS STAGGERING

Now let's examine whether a person ought to repay their ancestors debts from a moral perspective. If we adopt a utilitarian framework, our goal is the most amount of good for the most amount of people. So the question is, will paying reparations to Black Americans have a net positive effect on society? We can get a good understanding of this by considering how reparations impacted Jews(the receivers) and Germans(the payers) in the aftermath of World War 2. "In a survey conducted by Al Branheim, Jews and Germans were asked about their level of spite or guilt for the deaths of the Holocaust on a scale of 1 to 10. The average for Jews was 2.7 and the average for Germans was 4.5. Compare this to another survey done by Branheim, this time comparing White and Black spite/guilt levels of slavery, we see the Blacks gave a rating of 8.9 and whites gave a rating of 2.3. The difference is staggering"(Eizenstat). This is problematic in two ways. Firstly, if Black people still feel anger or hatred towards White people for slavery, then this decreases the probability for interracial friendships and relationships and increases the probability of interracial conflict, leading to a less happy society overall. Secondly, the lack of White guilt increases the probability of continued discrimination of Black folk by White folk, which has a net negative effect on the well being of Black people. Jewish people were able to forgive and move on from anti-German sentiment precisely because of reparations. It is likely reparations for Black people will have the same emotional benefits for American society. But the benefits don't stop there. According to Rashawn Ray, a Black Journalist for Brookings, "Wealth is positively correlated with better health, educational, and economic outcomes. Furthermore, assets from homes, stocks, bonds, and retirement savings provide a financial safety net for the inevitable shocks to the economy and personal finances that happen throughout a person’s lifespan". What this means is that a huge portion of the Black population, which currently has the highest poverty rates in the U.S., can escape poverty and begin to build wealth for themselves and their descendants. The outcomes of such a policy would ripple throughout the history of the U.S. and yield positive outcomes for centuries to come.

However, the felicific calculus is not so simple. One of the complexities of individual versus group reparations is the difficulty in determining who should receive them. The harm caused by slavery and Jim Crow was inflicted on a large group of people rather than on specific individuals. Reparations would have to be distributed to the entire group, but determining who belongs to the group and how to quantify the harm done to each person is a challenging task. While some people can trace their ancestry back to slaves, others may have mixed ancestry or have immigrated to the United States after the abolition of slavery. Therefore, a comprehensive plan for reparations must take into account these complexities and ensure that it is fair and just for all.

THE LIKELIHOOD OF DIVISION

What about the potential negative impacts on the relationship between different racial groups reparations might have? Some people may view reparations as a form of punishment or an admission of guilt for something they did not personally do. This can create resentment and division rather than unity and understanding. Additionally, some people may see reparations as an excuse for Black Americans not to take responsibility for their own lives and actions. Ben Shapiro, a writer and the owner of the Daily Wire states "Look, it's a matter of culture. At the end of the day, anyone who pretends that handing several thousand dollars to African Americans every month over the course of say, 24 months is going to magically solve their problems is nuts. What really matters is what you do with that money. If you invest it in education and your family, great. If not, the likelihood of division and bitterness is higher.". Therefore, any plan for reparations must also include efforts to promote reconciliation, understanding, and unity between different racial groups. It must be a collaborative effort to address past injustices and build a better future for all Americans. Furthermore, it must be done in tandem to investing in education so that the money is spent on generational wealth. The truth is that the impact of reparations on the level of unity or division that exists within the United States is difficult to predict. It is possible that reparations could have both positive and negative effects, and this could depend on the specific form that the reparations take, as well as the way they are implemented.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I think that a person has a moral responsibility, but not a social responsibility, to pay for their ancestors debts. While society does not expect us to pay for our ancestors debts as implied by current estate-of-the-dead practices, we still morally ought to if we have the capability to do so. Practically, this might look like having all White people pay an extra tax. As for how this answer affects our discussion of reparations for Black Americans, the answer is not very much. This is because the issue is muddied by the fact that we're talking about a group paying reparations to another group rather than an individual to an individual. And what's more, we're talking about theft that has taken place over many generations, so tracking what exactly has been stolen from whom is near impossible. The consequences of this are drastic. For example, my parents immigrated to America from Armenia less than 30 years ago. I am a citizen of the U.S., which makes me a White American. Does this mean that I would have to pay reparations to Black people as well, even though my ancestors had no hand in the Atlantic Slave Trade? If not, how will people track whose ancestors did what? I don't know the answer to this, or the answer to many other questions regarding the practicality of reparations, but what I do know is this: discussion of reparations, in some form or another, are deserved for Black Americans. As an American myself, I know that we can not have widespread peace, happiness and prosperity for all until we address our ugly past.

Annotated Bibliography

1. “Can You Inherit Debt?” Capital One, https://www.capitalone.com/learn-grow/life-events/ can-you-inherit-debt/.

This article published by Capital One answers the question of whether or not one can inherit debt from a family member. The article provides an overview of the legal and financial implications of inheriting debt and discusses the different types of debt that can be passed down. The article is intended for a general audience and aims to provide information on the topic of inheriting debt. The article concludes that while inheriting debt is possible, it is not always automatic and depends on the specific circumstances. The article suggests that consulting with an attorney or financial advisor may be necessary to navigate the complexities of debt inheritance. This source is useful for understanding the legal and financial implications of inheriting debt, particularly for those who may be in the process of estate planning or dealing with the passing of a family member. However, as it is published by a financial institution, there may be some inherent bias towards using their services.

1. Eizenstat, Stuart E., et al. “What Holocaust Restitution Taught Me about Slavery Reparations.” POLITICO Magazine, 27 Oct. 2019, https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/10/27/slavery-reparations-holocaust-restitution-negotiations-229881/.

This article published by POLITICO Magazine draws parallels between Holocaust restitution and slavery reparations. The article's authors, including Stuart E. Eizenstat, who served as the U.S. Special Representative for Holocaust Issues, argue that the process of Holocaust restitution can offer insight into the reparations debate surrounding slavery. The article discusses the history of Holocaust restitution, including the challenges faced by survivors and the international negotiations that took place, and explores how this process could inform discussions on reparations for slavery. The article is aimed at a general audience and seeks to draw attention to the importance of reparations for past injustices. The article concludes that restitution and reparations are not only a matter of justice but also an essential part of the healing process for those affected by past atrocities. This source is useful for understanding the historical context and potential implications of reparations, particularly for those interested in the current debate on reparations for slavery.

1. Ray, Rashawn, and Andre M. Perry. “Why We Need Reparations for Black Americans.” Brookings, Brookings, 4 Mar. 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020/bigideas/why-we-need-reparations-for-black-americans/.

This article published by Brookings Institution argues for the necessity of reparations for Black Americans. The authors, Rashawn Ray and Andre M. Perry, discuss the history of racial injustice in the United States and its ongoing impact on Black communities. The article explores the potential forms that reparations could take, including direct payments, community investments, and educational initiatives. The article is aimed at policymakers and advocates for racial justice and seeks to contribute to the ongoing discussion on reparations. The article concludes that reparations are necessary to address the historic and ongoing injustices faced by Black Americans and to work towards a more equitable future. This source is useful for understanding the arguments in favor of reparations and the potential solutions that could be pursued.

1. Shapiro, Ben. “The Battle over Racial Reparations |&nbsp;EP. 1648.” YouTube, YouTube, 17 Jan. 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmrBSKl4eQQ.

This video segment published by The Ben Shapiro Show on YouTube features Ben Shapiro's commentary on the debate surrounding reparations for slavery. The video discusses the arguments for and against reparations and includes excerpts from interviews with various commentators and activists. The video is aimed at a conservative audience and seeks to offer a conservative perspective on the reparations debate. The video concludes that reparations are not a viable solution to addressing the historic injustices of slavery and that other policy solutions should be pursued. This source is useful for understanding the arguments against reparations and the perspectives of conservative commentators on the issue. However, as the source is from a conservative commentator, there may be a bias in favor of opposing reparations and dismissing their importance. Additionally, as it is a video segment, it may be more difficult to use as a source for research purposes compared to written articles.

Additional Works Cited

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. “The Case for Reparations.” The Atlantic, Atlantic Media Company, 2 Feb. 2023, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations /361631/.