

Who Is Morally Responsible for Global Poverty?

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1. Notes and Slides

The video is from a rehearsal the day before, still a bit rough. Especially the end.

1.1. Background

Humans differ with respect to their political and ethical views. One dimension of difference concerns libertarianism and duties arising from others' needs. At the libertarian extreme, any constraints on an individual's freedom or coercive demands on their property are morally wrong; others' needs impose no duties to make even trivial sacrifices to provide assistance.¹ At the opposite extreme, which I label 'socialist',² ideals of equality outweigh individual freedoms and property rights. The needs of the global poor entail that anyone who can meet these needs without making great sacrifices themselves are morally required to do so.

Even a brief glance at history tells us that this diversity in political and ethical views is likely to persist for some time. And that for almost any position there will be thoughtful, well-informed people who occupy it.

Some of this diversity is probably due to personality differences (Feinberg et al. 2012). Prospects of agreement on the libertarian–socialist dimension are slim.

Arguments that work regardless of your position on this dimension are therefore especially valuable.

Pogge (2005) argues that citizens of wealthy countries are morally responsible for global poverty. Importantly for us, his argument is supposed to work regardless of whether you are more libertarian or more socialist.

1.2. The Questions

Do 'the global poor have a [weaker] moral claim to that 1 percent of the global product they need to meet their basic needs than we affluent have to

¹ See van der Vossen (2019): '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.'

² This is confusing terminology: my 'socialist' includes people who are both economically liberal and economically conservative, even though neither is likely to label themselves 'socialist' (and people who do use that label do not generally endorse coercive *global* redistribution).

take 81 rather than 80 percent for ourselves' (Pogge 2005)?

Are 'we, the citizens and governments of the affluent countries, in collusion with the ruling elites of many poor countries, [...] harming the global poor by imposing an unjust institutional order upon them' (Pogge 2005)?

1.3. Pogge's Aim

Pogge aims to challenge

'[t]he 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).

Pogge (2005) aims to establish instead that reducing severe poverty abroad at the expense of our own affluence would not be generous on our part, but is something we owe, and our failure to do this does make us morally responsible for the continued deprivation of the poor.

In this talk I am not considering any of Pogge's arguments in much detail. Instead I am attempting to extract a central theme from Pogge and a key limit of his arguments.

1.4. Two perspectives on poverty-caused deaths

Pogge's aims can be understood in terms of a distinction between needs-based and harm-based duties.

- needs-based: We citizens of affluent countries have a positive duty to meet needs.
- harm-based: We have a negative duty not to harm.

Whereas libertarians and socialists divide over needs-based duties, they largely agree on harm-based.

An argument from harm-based considerations should therefore work regardless of your views on the libertarian–socialist dimension.

1.5. Pogge's main argument

1.6. Background assumptions

2. 'one can justify an economic order and the distribution it produces [...] by comparing them to feasible alternative institutional schemes and the distributional profiles they would produce.'
3. 'an economic order is unjust when it [...] foreseeably and avoidably gives rise to massive and severe human rights deficits'

1.7. The argument

1. 'Global institutional arrangements are causally implicated in the reproduction of massive severe poverty.'
2. 'Governments of our 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'³
4. 'many citizens of these affluent countries bear responsibility for the global institutional arrangements their governments have negotiated in their names.' (Pogge 2005)

1.8. Pogge's big idea

From weak assumptions about duties not to harm it is possible to derive a radical conclusion about redistribution.

1.9. An Objection

Patten (2005) observes that eliminating unfair global institutional arrangements will not entirely end mass global poverty.

On Pogge's view,

³ To illustrate, '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' (Pogge 2005).

‘The gap between [the distributive outcomes that would be likely to arise under [a] fair international order and [...] the [outcomes] associated with the actual international order] tells us the degree of responsibility of the actual order for the outcomes it is associated with’ (Patten 2005, p. 23).

It follows that there is mass global poverty for which, on Pogge’s view, the wealthy have no moral responsibility. Why? Because even ‘under an ideally fair set of international rules, [...] there would still be significant numbers of desperately poor people in the world’. After all, ‘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).

If we think exclusively in terms of harm through unfair international agreements, ‘these victims of poverty do not count as “harmed” by the affluent countries.’

This leads to a dilemma for Pogge’s argument considered as an attempt to avoid discriminating between libertarian and socialist positions ...

1.10. A dilemma

Beyond their responsibility for fair global institutional arrangements, do citizens of wealthy countries have any additional moral duties concerning mass global poverty?

A negative answer is unacceptable to socialists, who will insist that ‘property and other rights of the privileged should not be regarded as so absolute as to override a duty to perform easy rescues’ (Patten 2005).

A positive answer is unacceptable to libertarians, who will insist that others’ needs do not morally require sacrifices on their parts (Nozick 1975).

1.11. Conclusion

Pogge’s argument is valuable insofar as it can provide some consensus on moral responsibility for mass global poverty regardless of political and ethical views.

But Pogge’s argument does not establish that diversity in political and ethical views is completely irrelevant to the truth about moral responsibility for mass global poverty.

2. Teaching Links

This open day talk comes from a first-year undergraduate course I taught at Warwick called ‘Central Themes in Philosophy’.

You can find notes, slides and sometimes recordings for my Warwick teaching here:

- <https://www.butterfill.com/#teaching>

References

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