

Lecture 07: Central Themes

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All unattributed quotes are from Pogge (2005).

1. The Question

version one: Are ‘the 955 million citizens of the affluent countries [...] morally entitled to their 81 percent of the global product in the face of three times as many people mired in severe poverty’?

A premise:

‘the radical inequality between our wealth and their dire need at least put[s] the burden on us to show why we should be morally entitled to so much while they have so little’

version two: Why should ‘the 955 million citizens of the affluent countries [... be] morally entitled to their 81 percent of the global product in the face of three times as many people mired in severe poverty’?

version three: 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 take 81 rather than 80 percent for ourselves’?

2. Pogge on Responsibility for World Poverty

‘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).

Structure: Pogge offers three challenges to the common assumption. The aim is to defend a negative answer to The Question (version 1).

3. First Challenge

Pro: ‘even the most radical inequality is morally justifiable if it evolved in a benign way’ ... ‘differences in diligence, culture, and social institutions, soil, climate, or fortune’ are what explain differences in wealth

Anti: ‘the actual historical crimes were so horrendous, diverse, and consequential that no historical entitlement conception could credibly support the view that our common history was sufficiently benign to justify today’s huge inequality in starting places’

4. Second Challenge

Pro: ‘it is permissible to uphold any economic distribution, no matter how skewed, if merely it

could have come about on a morally acceptable path’

Anti: ‘the justice of any institutional order [...] depends on whether the worst-off under it are at least as well off as people would be in a state of nature with a proportional resource share.’

Anti: ‘however one may want to imagine a state of nature [...], one could not realistically conceive it as involving suffering and early deaths on the scale we are witnessing today. ... Only a thoroughly organized state of civilization can produce such horrendous misery and sustain an enduring poverty death toll of 18 million annually.’

5. Third Challenge

Pro: ‘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.’

Anti: ‘an economic order is unjust when it [...] foreseeably and avoidably gives rise to massive and severe human rights deficits’

Anti: ‘There is a shared institutional order that is shaped by the better-off and imposed on the worse-off [...] This institutional order is implicated in the reproduction of radical inequality in that there is a feasible institutional alternative under which such severe and extensive poverty would not persist’

Illustration:

‘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.’

Challenge 3 rests on three claims

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. ‘many citizens of these affluent countries bear responsibility for the global institutional arrangements their governments have negotiated in their names.’

6. Conclusion

Pogge’s big idea: From weak assumptions about duties not to harm it is possible to derive a radical conclusion about redistribution.

References

Pogge, T. W. M. (2005). World Poverty and Human Rights. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 19(1), 1–7.