

Lecture 09: Central Themes

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1. Two Questions

Is nationality morally irrelevant to how people of different nationalities should be treated or valued? [from Lecture 08]

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)? [from Lecture 07]

2. Pogge’s Aim: Recap

Pogge (2005): 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.

2.1. Two perspectives on poverty-caused deaths

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

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

2.2. 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).

3. An Objection to Pogge

3.1. Pogge’s main argument

‘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.’

‘We might hypothesize about the distributive outcomes that would be likely to arise under this 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).

3.2. Patten’s dilemma

1. ‘even in a fair international environment there is no guarantee that the policies needed to

fight poverty will be introduced domestically ...

2. ‘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).

Therefore:

3. under an ideally fair set of international rules, [...] there would still be significant numbers of desperately poor people in the world.

Therefore:

4. Citizens of affluent countries ‘would not have eradicated the most morally salient fact from a needs-based perspective—the fact of poverty.’

Yet:

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

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 be abandoning a needs-based, rather than (as claimed) an exclusively harm-based, perspective.

3.3. Pogge's Reply

1. I do not accept a merely formal standard of justice
2. 'the standard of social justice I invoke is a human rights standard': a just institutional order cannot 'foreseeably reproduce avoidable human rights deficits on a massive scale'
3. This is 'a negative constraint on which institutional schemes it is permissible to impose', not an argument that there is a duty to help.

4. Bok and Sen on Sidgwick's Dilemma

4.1. Sidgwick's Dilemma

'Henry Sidgwick took the contrast between [...] two perspectives to be so serious as to threaten any coherent view of ethics. On one hand, he held as the fundamental principle of ethics "that another's greater good is to be preferred to one's own lesser good." According to this principle, any sacrifice on one's own part would be called for, so long as it could achieve a greater good for others, no matter where they lived. On the other hand, Sidgwick also accepted what he called the common-sense view that our obligations to help others differ depending on the relationships in which we stand to them—relationships of family member, friend, neighbor, and fellow citizen.' (Bok 1996, p. 40)

4.2. Sen on the Domain of Concern

The primary thing is to 'bring everyone into the domain of concern, without eliminating anyone'. After doing that, we may find reason to give 'additional weight to the interests of those who are linked to us in some significant way' (Sen 1996, p. 114).

5. Conclusion

Insofar as our concern is with global justice, it may not matter very much whether or not nationality is morally relevant.

References

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