

INTERVIEW

Interview with Professor Thomas Pogge

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Professor Thomas Pogge
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Ethics and Economics (E&E): - “Academic philosophers often oppose your position on global justice to Singer’s preference satisfaction view on the one hand and to Sen and Nussbaum’s capability approach on the other (both Singer and Nussbaum have interviewed for Ethics and Economics). To what extent would you say that your disagreements with their positions are reflected in the practical conclusions you draw concerning the reduction of world poverty?”

Thomas Pogge (T.P.): - “Our practical conclusions diverge considerably in what we emphasize. Singer focuses most on aid effort affluent people can undertake or support as individuals. I focus most on structural reforms that would not channel money to the global poor but would lift from them burdens that we currently impose on them for our benefit: we must reduce, revise, or remove protectionist barriers, structural adjustment programs, rents for use of our ‘intellectual property’, and the international resource, borrowing, treaty, and arms privileges. (To explain these privileges: under existing international rules, we in effect authorize any person or group holding effective power in a country – regardless of how they acquired or exercise it – to sell the country’s resources and to dispose of the proceeds of such sales, to borrow in the country’s name and thereby to impose debt service obligations upon it, to sign treaties on the country’s behalf and thus to bind its present and future population, and to use state revenues to buy the means of internal repression.) Sen emphasizes reforms of social institutions and policies in the poorer countries themselves. However, these differences in practical conclusions are orthogonal to the differences in our moral positions.

* A short biography of Pr. Pogge follows the interview.

The principled moral differences are, first, that I emphasize negative duties while Singer focuses on positive duties and Sen/Nussbaum do not highlight the distinction. I see this as a nice complementarity, not as a disagreement. But it does have this consequence: I am especially concerned with people whose lives are blighted as a result of unjust social institutions in whose design or imposition I and my readers participate. Other people may be just as badly off – on account of an accident or genetic defect, for example. Of course we ought to help the latter. But on my view, our obligations to the former are of greater weight. Other things (namely, what is at stake for all involved) being equal, our duties not to harm are more stringent than our duties to aid.”

E&E: - “*Could you please explain the distinction you use between positive and negative duties, and how you use this distinction in your work on global justice?*”

T.P.: - “Thinking about justice is often divided into two domains: international and intra-national. In the first domain, people think in interactional terms about the rules that states ought to obey in their conduct. In the second domain, the question is to what extent the rules according to which each state is organized are producing certain harms or benefits for the population. This institutional analysis, which is commonplace intra-nationally, is one that I want to carry to the global level.

The global economic order as we now have it consists of a very large set of rules. By analyzing severe poverty and premature deaths both institutionally and on the global level, we can trace back their overall incidence to the relevant institutional rules, such as the evolving system of amazingly detailed treaties and conventions structuring the world economy, regulation trade (WTO), investments, loans, patents, copyrights, trademark, double taxation, labor standards, environmental protection and much else. Responsibilities for these rules and their foreseeable effects lie primarily with the governments of the more powerful countries which, in international negotiation, enjoy a huge advantage in bargaining power and expertise. Their negotiators have succeeded, again and again, in shaping the rules in the interest of the governments, corporations and citizens of the rich countries. In many cases, rules so shaped foreseeably inflict great harm upon the global poor – harms that one can estimate at least in general statistical terms. Seeing that our wealthy countries are at least approximately democratic, we citizens, certainly share responsibility for the rules our governments negotiate in our names and for the human cost these rules impose around the world. But there are also less obvious rules that have a tremendous negative effect on living conditions in the poor countries. Take the international resource and borrowing privileges, which allow any person or group holding effective power in a developing country to sell the resources of the country or to borrow in its name, irrespective of whether that person or group has any kind of democratic legitimacy. (I skip here two further, complementary privileges related to

arms and treaties: any person or group holding effective power in a developing country is recognized as entitled to purchase weapons – most often used for domestic repression – and is entitled to sign treaties in the name of the whole countries). These privileges are very convenient for the rich countries who can buy resources from anybody who happens to exercise effective power in a country. However, they are devastating for the populations of the developing countries, in particular in Africa. This is an example of how the international order, largely upheld by the rich countries, aggravates oppression and poverty in the poor countries. Therefore, we should not only think about how states ought to behave in their interactions with one another. We should also consider the framework of global rules and what effects this framework has on phenomena such as poverty.

Now, there is a very old and conventional distinction in moral philosophy between positive and negative duties. When the conduct of one person is causally related to the fate of another person, then philosophers distinguish between two different ways in which that relation might exist. In the first case, a person actively does something that causes harm to another person. In the second case a person merely fails to do something he could have done to prevent something bad from happening to the other person. For example, you might throw a baby into the water and as consequence the baby drowns, or you might fail to rescue a baby already in the water with the result that this baby dies. Philosophers believe that this distinction between the negative duty not to harm and the positive duty to help is morally significant. In the context of understanding what human rights are it is a very important distinction. In my view, somebody is a human rights violator only when he or she actively harms others or contributes to harming them. Human rights, this very minimal notion of what human beings owe one another, do not require that people benefit or rescue or protect each other. They merely require that we do not harm others. However, with regard to poverty, even this very minimal demand is arguably widely unfulfilled today, since the rich countries and their citizens collectively harm many in the poor countries through the global economic order they impose.”

E&E: - “Your distinction between positive and negative duties might be traced back to Cicero’s interpretation of the Stoics (in On Duties). But Cicero, and the Stoics, seem to emphasize the importance of the duty to prevent harm as well as the duty not to harm. Is your emphasis on negative duties, i.e. the duty not to harm, perhaps a pragmatic one, rising from the belief that most severe poverty is the direct result of rules imposed by rich countries? If we succeeded in changing the economic structure of the world such that rich countries no longer harmed poor countries, would we no longer have a duty to aid each other? Or in cases where harm is not a result of international policies, do we have a duty to aid? For example, when New Orleans was struck by a natural disaster, various charities, including the hungersite.com,

made international appeals for help. Do you feel that their appeal was in any way legitimate, or rather, that citizens of the world had no duty to respond?"

T.P.: - "Yes, this emphasis is in part pragmatic. I do believe that most severe suffering in this world would be avoided if the rich countries merely fulfilled their duty not to harm. I also find, especially in the Anglophone countries, a great reluctance to take positive duties seriously. And this is most of my audience, an extremely powerful constituency in this world! I say to them: "I know what you expect from a lecture or essay about global poverty: an appeal to be more generous, to give more aid. But you will not get this from me. I am leaving positive duties aside and rest my case entirely on negative duties..."

Many have criticized me for rejecting positive duties. Such criticisms are simply mistaken. By taking positive duties off the table in conversation with some particular audience, I am not denying such duties in anyway. I am simply leaving them aside because I expect that no agreement can be reached. Of course I believe in positive duties. But I keep them out of much of my work to make it very clear that I need not appeal to them. I want to reach people Peter Singer cannot reach; and those people will tune out as soon as I talk about positive duties.

One more thing. Your New Orleans example is flawed in an interesting way. Yes, New Orleans was hit by a disastrous storm (Katrina). But the city was flooded because the levies were insufficient and had been known to be so for a long time. The great harm people suffered was caused by a confluence of natural and social factors. And I would then have formulated the appeal — certainly to compatriots — differently. Not: "Dear fellow citizens, please help us, we were hit by a storm." But rather: "Dear fellow citizens, due to a grotesquely unjust allocation of infrastructure spending by the federal and state governments, favoring white over black, affluent over poor, and Republican over Democrat neighborhoods, we have been exposed to a substantial risk of devastating flood. This flood has now come to pass, and the damage it does is your responsibility. You must now do what you can to minimize the harm you will have caused."

E&E: - *"Is your emphasis on negative rather than positive duties in any way motivated by the question of how duties might be enforced, i.e. do you think that there is a better chance of enforcing negative duties? If so which forms of enforcement are acceptable, both on the part of governments and on the part of individuals?"*

T.P.: - "I do think that negative duties correlative to human rights are in principle enforceable. But this does not motivate my emphasis. I believe that, in this context, any use of force by individuals is highly counter-productive. We must patiently convince the citizens of the more affluent countries that they must end their crime against

humanity. Violence makes it all too easy for them to close their ears, as we have witnessed in the aftermath of 9/11. If these citizens agree to institutional arrangements more protective of the global poor, then these arrangements may of course be enforced by governments in the usual way. For example, the governments of the EU may (and should) enforce regulations and taxes designed to protect the poor abroad from the effects of present and past injustice.”

E&E: - “Many of the solutions you propose for relieving world poverty are at government level. How does this translate in terms of citizens’ responsibilities? Does our responsibility end with a rational vote, or should we also lobby governments and multinational corporations in order to influence their policies?”

T.P.: - “Our responsibility as citizens is two-fold: (1) We should organize, with others, for reforms of our governments’ policies and negotiating position in international fora. This extends far beyond voting, which often gives us a meaningless choice once every four years. To change things in politics, we must seek to influence the political agenda. (2) We should work to protect the global poor from part of the harm we also cooperate in imposing on them.

In both these respects together, we should – as a matter of *negative* duty – do about as much as would be necessary, if others similarly placed did as we do, to compensate for the harm we together do. Whether to focus more on reform or on harm prevention, and which efforts exactly to undertake – this cannot be said generally. Each of us should consider his or her situation, endowments and abilities, motivational constraints, activities of like-minded people around us, and so on, and should then decide on this basis what effort would make most sense in terms of cost effectiveness.”

E&E: - “Other than governments and particulars, responsibility for dealing with global poverty falls to international organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and IMF. How do you perceive the role, influence and limitations of these organizations?”

T.P.: - “Of course the UN, World Bank, IMF should work to reduce poverty. But for now these organizations are counter-productive by creating the false public appearance of concern and commitment. The UN, for example, has managed to dilute the grand goal of “reducing the number of under-nourished people to half their present level no later than 2015” (World Food Summit, Rome, 1996) to the rather less ambitious goal to reduce the number of extremely poor people by 19 percent in the same nineteen year period (First Millennium Development Goal, calling for a fifty percent reduction, between 1990 and 2015, in the proportion of extremely poor people understood as their percentage of the total population of the developing countries). And the World

Bank has practiced a poverty measurement methodology so severely lacking in internal robustness and reliability that we still have no clear idea about the level, geographical distribution, and trend of severe poverty worldwide.

Because the practices of these intergovernmental organizations do not change in response to arguments, they need to be changed politically. Citizens of the wealthier countries are best positioned to do this by exerting pressure on their governments, which, together, shape the policies of the UN and its subsidiary organizations. The task of poverty measurement might well be performed by a non-governmental agency, rather than by the World Bank whose policies are judged by the trend figures it itself produces. And the task of eradicating poverty might be coordinated, better than by the UN, by a consortium of willing states (clustered around the EU and Canada, perhaps). Once such a consortium of states showed genuine commitment and take effective steps towards poverty eradication, public pressure to join might well mount in other rich states, even in the U.S. But really – and this is the amazing thing about global poverty – whereas the problem is so huge that it kills one third of all human beings or 18 million each year, the same problem is also so small that it can comfortably be solved without the US and without Japan. The rich countries currently spend about US\$6 billion annually on official development assistance on meeting basic needs (“ODA for basic social services”). A serious effort against poverty and its associated diseases would cost 20 to 50 times as much (some of this in additional aid, but much also in foregone unjust gains the affluent countries now derive from unfair trading practices and unjust monopoly rents on their “intellectual property” in essential medicines, seeds, and so on). The collective gross national incomes (GNIs) of the affluent countries sum to something like \$28,000 billion. This reduces to roughly half if the US and Japan are taken out. That is still enough to underwrite a serious \$100 billion or \$200 billion poverty eradication campaign. All that’s missing is the political will in these countries to raise official development assistance on effective poverty eradication alone, unperturbed by the self-interested political and commercial interests that currently dominate decisions about ODA allocations.”

Professor Pogge left Germany to study in Harvard in 1977. His Ph.D. thesis on Kant, Rawls and global justice was supervised by John Rawls. Prof. Pogge's research focused at first on the problem of applying the Rawlsian theory of justice to the international domain. He came up against two major obstacles: first he was not able to convince Rawls of the importance of translating his work from the domestic to the global order, and secondly he realized that Rawls's theory was unworkable even in the domestic domain as it ran counter to a number of deeply held moral convictions. From then on Pogge worked on developing his own approach to the question of global justice, emphasizing the importance of negative duties (duties not to harm) over positive duties (duties to aid). He is widely published on the question of global justice, but also on Kant, Rawls, and Ethics. For a complete bibliography, see Prof. Pogge's homepage: <http://www.columbia.edu/~tp6/index.html>