

Pogge on "Assisting" the Global Poor Note for Philosophy 162

The title conveys the message. Pogge puts scare quotes around "assisting." In many cases, he thinks aiding the global poor would not be helping them out of charity, but is better regarded as repairing damage we have wrongfully caused.

Suppose there is no duty to help those in need, merely because they are in need. (This might or might not be so; let's just assume it is so and see what follows.) Pogge thinks we still might be obligated to help the needy, if we are responsible for their being now in a needy state. This would be so if we have wrongfully harmed them or have profited from unjust arrangements at their expense. Pogge gives the example of being present in the aftermath of a car crash. There are accident victims who need medical attention. There is a difference between being a bystander and being someone who causally contributed to the crash, perhaps by faulty behavior such as reckless speeding. In the latter case I am morally responsible for the fact that people are in a predicament and I have a special obligation to minimize the resultant damage and to repair the damage I have brought about. With respect to the global poor, Pogge thinks the members of affluent nations are not bystanders.

Moreover, special ties that might be thought to take priority over mere duties of charity to aid the less fortunate would have less trumping force or perhaps no force at all in overriding obligations to minimize and repair wrongfully caused damage. It might be acceptable to decline to aid the accident victims in order to fulfill some lesser need of one's own child but unacceptable to decline to aid the victims of an accident one has oneself wrongfully caused by appeal to the prior duty to help one's own child.

How according to Pogge are we (in rich nations) harming the global poor or profiting from unjust arrangements at their expense?

First, Pogge considers an objection, the Purely Domestic Poverty Thesis (PDPT). This is the claim that the causes of the poverty of poor countries are internal to each such country. Pogge cites John Rawls as asserting this claim. Rawls is quoted as follows: "the causes of the wealth of a people and the forms it takes lie in their political culture and in the religious, philosophical, and moral traditions that support the basic structure of their political and social institutions, as well as in the industriousness and cooperative talents of its members, all supported by their political virtues. . . .the political culture of a burdened society is all-important. . . .Crucial also is the country's population policy." Pogge adds that according to Rawls when a society persists in poverty, "the problem is commonly the nature of the public political culture and the religious and philosophical traditions that underlie its institutions. The great social evils in poorer societies are likely to be oppressive government and corrupt elites."

Pogge thinks bad reasoning might lead us to embrace PDPT. It is evident that different poor countries over the past 50 years have experienced very different degrees of economic success. Since they face pretty much the same global economic order, the variation must be explained by country-specific factors, Hence, PDPT.

Pogge: "This reasoning connects three thoughts: there are great international variations in the evolution of severe poverty. These variations must be caused by local (country-specific) factors. These factors, together, fully explain the overall evolution of severe poverty worldwide. To see the fallacy, consider this parallel: there are great variations in the performance of my students. These variations must be caused by local (student-specific) factors. These factors, together, fully explain the overall performance of my class." Pogge objects: "Clearly, the parallel reasoning results in a falsehood. The overall performance of my class also crucially depends on the quality of my teaching and on various other 'global' factors as well."

So, country-specific factors might well combine with global factors to produce the evolution of severe poverty that we observe. (Also, the global factors are themselves obviously not uniform in their causal impact on different countries.) Pogge concentrates on the international institutions and practices that establish the rules of the game, the framework for interaction within which global trade takes place. He writes, "There is considerable international economic interaction regulated by an elaborate system of treaties and conventions about trade, investments, loans, patents, copyrights, trademarks, double taxation, labor standards, environmental protection, use of seabed resources and much else." Call the ensemble of international institutions and treaties the global economic order. Pogge points out that it is pretty much set by the wealthiest and most powerful nations and is tailored to suit their interests. The global economic order is not something that happens; it is something "we" do. He suggests, "If the global economic order plays a major role in the persistence of severe poverty worldwide and if our governments, acting in our name, are prominently involved in shaping and upholding this order, then the deprivation of the distant needy may well engage not merely positive duties to assist but also more stringent negative duties not to harm."

[COMMENT. I have a broad worry about the picture Pogge paints. Consider a world of two individuals, Rich and Poor. If it is assumed that Rich and Poor legitimately own their present wealth holdings and that Rich is under no strict duty to aid Poor merely because Poor is ailing and could benefit from help, then why do strong duties to benefit Poor spring into being when (if) Rich and Poor make some mutually agreeable trades? If it is OK for Rich to have nothing at all to do with Poor, then even if the trades they make reflect their unequal resource holdings and bargaining power, and provide greater gains for Rich than Poor,

Rich's failure to interact with Poor in a way that would be maximally advantageous to Poor cannot count as harming. Or suppose there are three individuals, Rich, Poor, and Poorer, and Rich, owing no Singeresque duty to help the needy, and free to interact not at all with either Poor or Poorer, chooses to make some trades with willing Poor but is not willing to trade with Poorer. Again, given the initial assumption, I don't see why this behavior counts as harming Poorer. And even if we say Rich harms Poorer, meaning that Rich could have behaved in a way that would have made Poorer much better off, this can surely not count as wrongful harming given the initial assumptions. Suppose Rich chooses to grow strawberries for himself, when he could have instead purchased strawberries from Poorer, to Poorer's great benefit. This no doubt leaves Poorer worse off than he might have been, but unless we have some reason to think Rich had a moral obligation to trade with Poorer on certain terms, his declining to trade at all with Poorer or to trade except on less advantageous terms does not plausibly qualify as wrongful harming. Or take a further case: Rich sets up a bazaar and determines the terms of trade within the bazaar. Anyone who trades with Rich in the bazaar must agree to Rich's (perhaps onerous) terms. Poor and Poorer engage in trade with Rich, but are less well off than they would have been, had Rich not imposed such onerous conditions for his engagement in trade. Or suppose Rich plays hardball in yet another way: He announces he will buy potatoes from Poorer only if Poorer agrees not to trade with Poor, or not to trade with Poor in specified ways contractually stipulated by Rich. I still wonder: Given that we are starting from the assumption that Rich owes Poor and Poorer nothing and need not interact with them at all, even if they starve as a result, what is the ground for thinking that IF Rich interacts at all with his neighbors, engages in mutually beneficial trades, he must do so on "fair" terms or else he qualifies as wrongfully harming his neighbors?

The issue posed here might be put this way: What is the morally relevant baseline, that we should deploy when we decide whether or not one person's conduct qualifies as wrongfully harming another? The issue is tricky. Suppose Smith has a broken leg, and will die unless he is taken to the hospital. I agree to take Smith to the hospital. Just before saying goodbye to Smith at the hospital entry, I viciously kick him in the leg. I deny that in the morally relevant sense I harmed Smith by kicking him, because Smith was overall far better off for interacting with me—the combination of the ride to the hospital and the kick made Smith far better off than he would have been had we not interacted at all. In this example, it seems I harm Smith by kicking him, and wrongfully harm him. The morally relevant baseline is not the one I cite.]

Pogge offers several examples of wrongfully harming the global poor and profiting from injustice at their expense:

1. P. 268. The longstanding failure of Rich nations to prevent their firms from bribing foreign officials in the course of doing business in countries in which such practices are prevalent. *[Comment: There is a context taken for granted issue here. Suppose a Nigerian firm will do business with a foreign firm and a Canadian and a Swedish firm are competing for the deal. Unless a kickback is paid to a Nigerian official, no deal goes forward. The Canadian firm might complain it is unfair competition if the Canadian firm is forbidden to pay the necessary bribe and for that reason alone the Swedish firm gets the contract.]*
2. P. 264. The rich nations set up protectionist tariffs that do not allow enterprises from poor nations to enter their markets. On the other hand, pressure is exerted on poor nations to induce them to open up their markets to imports from Rich nations' firms.
3. Pp. 269-70. The international legal order in effect operates in this way: Any de facto government of a country is treated as a de jure legitimate government, entitled to dispose of the country's national resources (the international resource privilege) and to borrow from sources abroad in the country's name (international borrowing privilege). This feature of the international legal order gives an incentive to greedy thugs in poor countries to take over the state so they can enrich themselves by exercising the international resource privilege and international borrowing privilege. The incidence of corrupt and bad political regimes in poor countries may be in part an effect of the normal functioning of the global political order.

Pogge himself raises the issue of the baseline. When we say X harmed Y, we have in mind some baseline, relative to which, X makes Y worse off. After canvassing alternatives, Pogge suggests the relevant baseline is set by an appropriate criterion of justice. It is not enough to say the poor nations are doing economically better than they were in the past—this is compatible with them doing better despite our wrongfully harming them. Nor is it good enough, if the poor nations are doing better than they would have done if some prior set of rules had remained in force—say, the international rules that prevailed between the twentieth century World wars, or during the years of the Cold War between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. For those rules themselves might have been unfair, so the fact that poor nations are better off now than they would have been had those rules stayed in force does not show they are not suffering from wrongful harm.

Pogge also considers the thought that justice might be completely unfeasible, hence irrelevant to moral assessment of people's actions in the status quo.

In the end Pogge suggests that the right theory of justice—constructing this or elaborating its requirements would be the work of another essay—provides the

appropriate baseline for our purposes. He writes that if the present global order is unjust, then we are “harming the global poor—by imposing on them an unjust global order under which the incidence of severe poverty, malnutrition, and premature death is higher than it would have been under any just alternative.” Even if I, an individual living in a rich nation, am not myself doing anything that substantially affects people abroad, I might still be benefiting from unjust arrangements, if Pogge is right, and obligated to pay back what I have unjustly gained to those from whom it was taken. All of this might hold true of me even if I am a poor person in a rich nation.

[Comment: If we think that justice requires helping the needy or providing everyone decent life prospects, then we would be back to a Singer-type position after a long detour seemingly away from it.]

[Comment: Determining what global justice requires looks to be a tall order. Is Pogge’s official position then agnosticism about whether we are wrongfully harming the global poor pending the resolution of this issue?]

[Comment: There is a question as to whether profiting from unjust arrangements, especially indirectly, suffices to trigger duties of reparation. Does one owe reparation, even if one would have been better off oneself, under just arrangements? Does the requirement go back in time; if so, how far? If the world had been just throughout its history, no doubt none of us would have existed (the earth’s population would have consisted entirely of individuals different from the ones who presently exist). I can’t claim to be harmed by past unjust arrangements, if I would not have existed had the unjust arrangements not existed. (This last point does not affect claims of compensation based on harms done by presently existing people to presently existing people.)