

# **Pogge and Singer: differences in their accounts of the duties of citizens in affluent societies to the global poor.**

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## **Abstract**

Nowadays we live in an age that reflects the incredible achievements of mankind. Developments such as air travel, computers, the enormous quantity of information available on the Internet, and even space travel, which seemed impossible just 100 years ago, are now the norm. There is, however, another development of the modern, global society that is distressing - poverty. Every day thousands of people die as a result of living in poverty, the reality of which is a life of hunger and susceptibility to preventable diseases. Moreover, we are more aware of these problems now – in our everyday lives and as part of academic discussions - due to widespread media and Internet influence. Two of the most influential philosophers of our time, namely Thomas Pogge and Peter Singer, made the problems of global poverty the central issue of their academic careers. This article will firstly outline Singer's account of how the citizens of developed countries could and moreover are morally obliged to deal with issues of global poverty. The article will also explore some critiques of Singer's work. The article will then critically assess Pogge's account on the problems of global poverty. I will argue that Pogge's ideas seem more applicable and are more persuasive. Finally, the article will argue that namely the problem of global poverty could be seen as being caused by structural features of the global capitalist society we are part of in the developed world.

**Keywords:** Poverty, Thomas Pogge, Peter Singer, philosophy.

## **Pogge and Singer: differences in their accounts of the duties of citizens in affluent societies to the global poor.**

### **Singer's account of the duties of the rich towards the global poor**

In his book "Famine, Affluence and Morality" (1972), Peter Singer proposes it is the duty of people living in affluent societies to regard global poverty as a central issue. In order to illustrate this, the Australian thinker gives us the famous pond example – if we are walking around the edge of a pond and see a child drowning in the water, we are morally obliged to save the child, regardless of the fact that this will ruin our new and expensive shoes. This metaphor suggests that common morality prioritizes, or at least should prioritize, human life over all material possessions, even the expensive ones. From here Singer makes the point that there is no difference if a child is drowning in a pond near us or starving in Africa. Moreover, he argues that as every mentally sane individual is morally obliged to save the child in the pond, he or she also has a moral obligation to save a child if it is starving, ill or dying from preventable causes in the Third World. We must also acknowledge that the pond example in the work of Singer is a clear example of 'positive duties', or the duty 'to assist' (Singer, 1972).

Furthermore Peter Singer stresses a further action every person living in a developed country should be obliged to take, which is to donate everything beyond his or her physical survival to the salvation of the global poor. This, of course, seems a very radical measure, especially for someone whose life is dominated by spending money and resources on things he or she does not actually need in order to survive. Again, the pond example shows us why we should do this – moral priority. As the human life is more valuable than any material possessions, according to common morality we should sacrifice our material-orientated lifestyle in order to save human lives. Moreover, we must do this not out of charity caused by a moment of compassion but out of a strict moral obligation towards other human beings whose lives we could save (Singer, 1972).

### **Criticism of Singer's account**

Although Singer's account - on the duties of the citizens of developed societies towards the global poor - seems accurate and morally justified it meets some very heavy criticism that this article will seek to evaluate. The first of these critiques is the so-called 'distance objection' – both physical and moral. The physical distance objection basically states that we do not have obligation to the global poor, simply because they are too geographically distant from us in contrast with the child in the

**Pogge and Singer: differences in their accounts of the duties of citizens in affluent societies to the global poor.**

pond, who is right in front of our eyes. This objection, however, does not seem too persuasive because common morality does not determine that someone standing one metre from the hypothetical pond is more obliged to help than someone who is 100 metres away for example, although the physical distance in the case of global poverty could be 100 times greater. Moreover, to take this idea to extremes, even if you go to the Moon, there will still be the child drowning in the pond or dying in Africa and you being at the Moon, or in some other country would not change this fact, nor your moral obligation to the person in need; because we are all human beings of equal intrinsic value, living in an interdependent global society, we are obliged to help each other (Singer, 1972).

Furthermore, the moral distance objection also seems rather naïve. It implies that our obligation to help other human beings only extends towards people who are close to us, for example friends, relatives, members of the same nation or society. From an emotional or psychoanalytic point of view this may seem persuasive, as we indeed have an obligation towards people who are emotionally close to us. But emotional closeness is not necessarily moral closeness; the two should not be confused. In fact a person could as easily have emotional detachment to objects and people that are irrationally distant from the self. And morality has to do with reason not with irrational emotions. Therefore one may argue that as we all live on one planet, in one global economic structure, in a situation of constant and increasing change of information and culture, we are all members of the same interconnected society. Therefore, we all have moral and rational obligation to every other human being, regardless of how one feels towards members of their immediate society (Arthur, 1974).

Another applicable critique is that the situation of the global poor could be seen as a bottomless and unaccountable barrel, which could easily lose all the resources we invest in it due to things such as underdeveloped social structures, corrupted governments and poor economic systems. This, however, does not mean that our obligation towards the global poor is diminished or even weakened, but rather the approach of donating everything we have is clearly wrong and ineffective (Arthur, 1974).

Furthermore, I find another critique of Singer's account much more persuasive. If, hypothetically, we donate everything beyond our survival to the global poor would not this mean an end of things that we cherish, which are beyond our physical survival, such as art, music and culture in general?

**Pogge and Singer: differences in their accounts of the duties of citizens in affluent societies to the global poor.**

Are we ready to live like animals, satisfying just our physical needs, regardless of the need to express ourselves through art and culture? What is even more important here is that our understanding of moral obligations to other people, one could argue, has developed exactly because of the cultural and humanist development of our societies. Secondly, these high levels of moral consciousness have been achieved using resources that are considered to be 'unnecessary' (according to Singer's account) spent on culture and education. Moreover, one could also argue that from an economic point of view this seems dangerous, as it could spurn enormous turmoil in the developed world, which may result in developed countries ending up at the same economic level as the countries initially needing help.

I also find another critique of Singer's view important, which is strictly philosophic and is the issue of who determines what the common morality is. If we assume that common morality is covered by the philosophers and they are the people who are to say what is "good" and respectively "bad", then Singer is clearly right and this critique is irrelevant. However, if we are to assume that morality is more a product of people or social structure - a system of beliefs and practices repeated over time - then I say Singer is merely exploiting a contradiction in common morality through his pond example. Moreover, following this line of thought, as the people, not philosophers, determine what common morality is, one may say that Singer is clearly wrong in his view. However, I personally think that common morality is indeed determined by the people, but none could deny the role of the philosophers in outlining to us the state of our morality, but never having to determine it for themselves. Furthermore, as people are proven to be irrational beings, ruled by emotions more than rational thinking, it is absolutely possible that contradictions such as the pond example are to be found.

The final, and in my opinion, most valid critique I would like to draw attention to, in response to Singer's account, is that it does not provide a solution to real-life problems, such as bad government, corrupt politics, economic underdevelopment. For every rational human being it is clear that nobody, or at least not the vast majority of people, is going to sacrifice their lifestyle for the sake of the global poor. Probably, it could be possible that the citizens of affluent societies are capable of donating much and therefore they are to a certain extent (determined by themselves) morally obliged to help the global poor, but in no case obliged to donate everything. Consequently, Singer's idea is applicable only in a theoretical world populated not by people - rather some species of highly

**Pogge and Singer: differences in their accounts of the duties of citizens in affluent societies to the global poor.**

moral beings - incapable of resolving real-life problems such as global poverty.

**Pogge's argument about the global poverty**

A much more persuasive account for understanding global poverty and what is more important – a realistic, applicable idea of how to deal with the issue – is to be found in the work of Thomas Pogge. The first thing, according to Pogge, is that what we, as citizens of affluent societies, should compensate Third World countries that to a great extent were harmed and impoverished by the colonial rule that ended not so long ago; many parts of Africa but also the Asian subcontinent, the Middle East as well as South-West Asia, for a large part of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, suffered economic exploitation, foreign intervention, massacres, famine caused by the redirection of resources within the colonial systems they were part of. Moreover, the subsequent drawing of political borders, regardless of ethnic and linguistic realities, also enforced by the former colonial powers, still have a tremendous negative effect on the political development of these countries. It is clear that under colonial rule developed countries violated their duties not to harm those who already lived in poverty. Furthermore, here we must also acknowledge that before the era of colonialism - which effectively began in the 17-18<sup>th</sup> Centuries - most of the Western powers were themselves quite poor. Moreover, by acknowledging that the Industrial Revolution of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century was fueled by slave labor and cheap resources from the colonies, we could conclude that the main reason why the West has developed is because of colonial exploitation. A particular example of this is the 'Atlantic triangular trade' where people from Africa were brought to the New World as slaves in order to produce cheap raw materials. These raw materials were subsequently brought to Europe's newly established factories and used to produce the West's wealth. Finally, it is also important to mention here that the relations of exploitation between the colonial powers and the subjugated colonies have contributed to the cultural and ideological division between the 'West', which is often perceived as intrinsically rational, prosperous and developed, and the 'East' as irrational, violent and underdeveloped. Moreover, this bilateral relationship further harms the developing world and its prospects of a better future (Pogge, 2004).

The second proposition of Pogge, in order to battle global poverty, is against the harmful trade restrictions of the World Trade Organization. The World Trade Organizations made it much

## **Pogge and Singer: differences in their accounts of the duties of citizens in affluent societies to the global poor.**

cheaper to trade between two developed countries than between a rich and poor country. Here, rightfully, Pogge recognizes this as a straight violation of the negative duties not to harm any country's economic development. His solution is straight forward – by removing these trade restrictions the developing countries will undoubtedly be much more economically competitive and consequently able to develop their economic wellbeing (Pogge, 2004).

Pogge recognizes another significant violation of the negative duties towards the global poor. The international community, dominated by the richest people, recognizes any government who manages to secure its position, regardless of how it has obtained this power. It does not matter if the government is democratically elected, legitimate or not. Furthermore, most of the undemocratic governments, as well as all that do not secure their legitimacy, endure consequences for the people they represent. This practice of recognising internationally who is in power must be ceased according to Pogge (Pogge, 2004).

### **Critiques of Pogge's view**

There are, of course, critiques on Pogge's view, which this article must outline. The first of them is that it simply does not take into account domestic factors such as social structure, culture, specific economic situations and politics. The second line of critique is an empirical one, namely that the rich may in fact not be rich enough to pay for the development of the poor (Jaggar, 2010).

I find another critique on Pogge's work also very vivid; colonialism was a problem for most of the developing world in the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Now, when the colonial system has been largely dismantled, some of its legacy, such as the artificial drawing of borders, could be overcome if former colonies were determined. This is not the case because their internal social, economic and political features, at least directly, have nothing to do with colonial rule. Second of all, the restrictions of the World Trade Organization are there for some economic reason such as the fact that developing countries, with their economic instability and internal pressure, are much less reliable trade partners even if they have something to trade. I am eager to assert that this is as much a problem of the profit-seeking capitalist mode of production that we are part of, as it is that the international community recognizes whoever is in power in a given country, prioritizing profit over morality.

## **Pogge and Singer: differences in their accounts of the duties of citizens in affluent societies to the global poor.**

However, there is another side of this argument. Some authors such as Hardt and Negri (2000) argue that although the traditional form of colonial rule ended, most of the former colonies still experience what is called neo-colonialism. This is a rather new form of economic exploitation where multinational companies, mostly originating from the old colonial powers, use the social and political instability of the former colonies in order to maximize their profit. In fact almost all of the countries in Africa, despite being rich in natural resources, are exploited through their internal instability and corruption by large Western mining and oil companies. The main point of the two authors here is that through these multinational companies the exploitative influence of the western powers in their former colonies is in effect continued. Moreover, this 'new world order' could be seen as completely different from the colonial system as economic exploitation is maintained by institutions like the IMF or the World Bank. In this new system the Third World is incorporated, without direct political rule, into a sovereign global political order established by the developed world.

### **Comparing Singer and Pogge's accounts**

In order to compare the accounts of the two philosophers from a normative point of view it is of considerable importance to compare the philosophical cores of their claims, namely the distinction between negative and positive duties. Pogge places emphasis mainly on the so-called 'negative duties' – in this case the moral duty of the developed countries not to harm the Third World. In contrast, Singer argues about what is called 'positive duties', in this case the duty to assist the global poor. In terms of comparing the two thinkers, in order to determine whose argument is more persuasive, the first thing to do is pay attention to how common morality refers to the negative and positive duties. For example, every one of us undoubtedly has a moral duty not to kill other human beings, not to steal and not to lie. The important thing in this example is that we have our negative duties every day, every hour, every second – they are virtually an inseparable part of our existence. Moreover, they refer to each and every one of us – rich, poor, clever, stupid, male and female. Positive duties, on the other hand, do not enjoy constant usage – if we help someone we are helping them here and now and not necessarily again tomorrow. Moreover, what seems more problematic about positive duties is that it is not very clear who they refer to. For example, Singer says all citizens of affluent societies are morally obliged to donate everything beyond their physical survival

## **Pogge and Singer: differences in their accounts of the duties of citizens in affluent societies to the global poor.**

to the global poor. This leads to the question of what physical survival is. For example, for someone in a certain society a Rolls-Royce may be deemed a necessity of life; it is clear, from a moral point of view, that in order to help the global poor we should, not exclusively, but for the most part, refer to the negative duties, a good example of which is to be found in the work of Pogge.

So far the article has outlined many normative comparisons between Pogge and Singer. However, here I want to draw a very basic but still vivid distinction between their views on the problems of global poverty. To do this I must first of all state what the very point of philosophy - in this case specifically political philosophy - is. If we assume that philosophy relates to us stories about high morality - about angelic moral creatures called people - it is clear that Singer's view is more persuasive. But if we are to look at the real, material world, with persistent problems of famine, misery and diseases, nobody could deny that Pogge provides us with a more accurate account of how to tackle these problems.

### **Conclusion**

This article critically examined the differences between the accounts of global poverty from Peter Singer and Thomas Pogge. The article concluded that as Pogge's account is under much less significant critique it is more persuasive. What has proved to be even more important is that Singer's account is applicable only in the minds of philosophers. In contrast, Pogge's account is much more realistic and problem-orientated and as such is more applicable to the physical world. Consequently, it is more likely to contribute to the solving of real problems and eradicate the main causes of global poverty.

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