Do Wealthy Persons from Developed Countries Have Any Responsibility to the Poor Persons from Underdeveloped Countries?

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The current studies on poverty revealed, over the years, countless issues regarding the inequality between people, the violation of their human rights, global justice or the advantages certain groups have over others. This is just one feature why the concern for the poor could be seen as a moral problem.

When we address to issues regarding extreme poverty and to the persons which are affected by it we are referring to values which might be named social values. In this case, we are dealing with a conflict between the duty to maximize the utility (maximizing the utility in our case means to find solution in order to enhance or to eliminate poverty so that the poor could have a good life) and the attempt to protect the rights and the liberties of the individuals. By enhancing the lives of the others it could be said that it automatically enhances the health at a global level, choosing a path with social achievements such as equality, ensuring that the rights and the liberties of the people are respected and that the overall utility is maximized. The extreme poverty raises a set of difficulties with many objectives, but they could be summed up in two main purposes: the purpose to protect the good of the public health and the purpose to protect the rights of the people (as members of the society). What does it mean to be poor in a developing country? Is this a problem on which we should focus? Many philosophers, economists, and medical researchers debate in their papers this matter and I will explain in the following passages why.

The goal of this article is to show a way in which we can discuss about the responsibility wealthy people from developed countries have to help the poor from the underdeveloped countries. The argument has at its core the idea that there is a global institutional order, through which the wealthy people from developed countries benefit

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from certain advantages that the inequality creates. Hence, examining extreme poverty from a global institutional order point of view, we could conclude that the rich people unfairly benefit from their position. But it does not necessarily mean that the only solution is to fight against this order.

*Keywords*: extreme poverty, equality, human rights, liberty, utility.

I. What Do We Mean by Poverty?

What does it mean to be poor? Well, the first answer that comes into our minds is that we label someone as poor when he does not have a minimum of necessary goods and does not have a good life (or with these goods and resources they barely survive) like: water, food, medicine, shelter, no job opportunities, no access to education, to medical healthcare, vulnerable to epidemics and diseases which are treatable, lives in an area with a high criminal rate, so on and so forth.

If we look more careful at what people consider to be poor we realize that its meaning is changing. The change could be explained if we correlate their responses with the economic status of their country or with other sets of beliefs and mentalities. Hence, for the poor persons from Ethiopia, to be poor means that there are big chances of dying next day, in other words, we identify a high risk of death. While in Jamaica it means that you work as a slave, around 18 hours per day, in order to survive (cf. Snel). As an opposite extreme, in the United States of America you could be labeled as a poor person if you do not have a home and a good wage. Though the poor from America have higher chances to survive than the poor from Ethiopia, we tend to label them as poor either way. In this article I will refer only to the people which live in extreme poverty, those which could be situated at the base of poverty.

II. To Do or to Allow a Harm?

In this section I will explain why it is important to make a distinction between *doing a harm* and *allowing a harm* when we talk about responsibility. When we deal for the first time with this distinction our
intuition is that harming someone is worst that allowing someone to harm. James Rachels disagrees with this claim and argues against it by using the following example:

1. Smith drowns his cousin.
2. Jones plans to drown his cousin but one day he spots him in the middle of a lake, drowning, and he does nothing to save him. (Rachels 1975, 78-86)

Though in the first case Smith performs an act and kills his cousin and in the second case Jones choose to do nothing, and the consequence is that his cousin dies, the intention of Jones to kill his cousin is the same. Therefore if the intention is the same then the wrong doing done by Smith and Jones is equivalent (Rachels 1975).

Rachels's argument has to deal with a problem, the thought experiment he uses to prove that his conclusion is valid does not take into account all the possible cases. One could say that Rachels adds a bad intention to both Jones and Smith, so that in this particular case we could agree that harming and allowing the harm are equal. But Rachels is not arguing that in all possible situations doing is worst that allowing. What he wants is to highlight that there are cases when doing and allowing could be the same. This does not mean that there are no cases when doing is worse than allowing. For example, if we compare the case were I drown someone with my own hands with the case when I pass near a lake in which a little girl is drowning and I choose to do nothing, doing is worse than allowing.

In the last example, we cannot say that allowing is the same as doing because my absence would generate a different outcome, my victim would still be alive, while in the second case the girl would be in the same dangerous situation. Rachels is quite clear that in this particular example we cannot say that drowning someone is the same as allowing someone to drown, as long as I have no bad intentions in the girl case. It should be noticed that we talk about a difference of degree and not of kind, in other words, the fact that you choose to do nothing does not mean that you are guilt free, it just means that it’s better than drowning someone with your bare hands.
III. The Responsibility towards Poor People from Underdeveloped Countries

Do the rich from developed countries have any responsibility towards the poor from underdeveloped countries? The discussion is not limited to what we discussed earlier about responsibility. In order to proceed we need to introduce two more concepts, *positive duties* and *negative duties*.

Negative duties are the duties which forbid one person to do any kind of harm to others. These duties are seen by Pogge as omissions (Pogge 2007, 20). A positive duty refers to situations when we can and we should help others. These kind of actions are considered intentional actions. Pogge claims that we have a negative duty to do no harm to others, especially when we are aware that we harm someone and we can stop.

III.1. Positive Duties

Peter Singer (1972) says that we have a positive duty towards the poor. He talks about the duty of wealthy people from developed countries towards the poor from the underdeveloped countries. In his opinion, it is important to reduce global poverty and he argues that we can do this only if all of us act well. He thinks that as good people we should not allow to be done any harm as long as we can do something against it (as long as we do not have to choose between something bad and something worse).

Can we apply any solution to this problem? Singer’s proposal is that all the people with big wages should donate a certain amount of money in order to help the poor who live in underdeveloped countries. This way, those who could not afford to help the poor because that way their welfare will be affected do not have to donate, while those who earn enough and their welfare would not be affected if they donated a certain percentage from their income should donate^2.

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^2 To be consulted Gauri and Sonderholm (2012).
This argument suggests that people should be allowed to flourish and to be let free in following their dreams and achieve their wishes. Should we force these people to prioritize donations over their dreams? Singer thinks that those who are able to flourish and afford to help others at the same time have an obligation to do so because it is unacceptable to let people die of starvation, lack of shelter or medicine as long as there are people who could live a good life and help the others as well. These people from developed countries have a moral duty to help the poor and the reason why they should do so is that “suffering from poverty is bad” (Huseby 2008, 2). He also claims that “if we can prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we morally ought to do so.” (Singer 1972, 231).

What about the distance? Does it matter if the poor are nearby or miles away from us? One might say that distance brings nothing new to the discussion, and that it is irrelevant from a rational point of view. But in reality people tend to make decisions differently, so proximity actually matters. For example, when we see a child in a lake, drowning, and the only way we can save him is to destroy a 500$ suit, we decide without too many problems to pay that price if that’s what it takes to save a life. While in the case of a child which is dying of lack of food, and we can save him only if we pay an equivalent amount as in the case from above, of 500$ (Kamm 2007, 347), we are less tempted to say that we have a duty to pay that amount in order to save the child. Though these cases are relevant for practical ethics, Singer says that from a moral point of view distance is irrelevant. I would not develop my view on this subject here but it is important to mention that Singers’ solution does not take into account how people actually make judgments but how they ought to make judgments.

III.2. Negative Duties

In a well-known article (Pogge 2007, 14), Pogge focuses on an argument based on negative duties. He argues that rich people from the more developed countries have a negative right to help the poor
because, in an institutional order which benefits just a few, the wealthy harm the poor. Pogge wants to make people aware of the fact that the poor are harmed by the behavior of the wealthy people from developed countries through an institutional order which gives the rich more opportunities and none to the poor.

Pogge states that rights have meaning only if: (i) the conditions to fulfill a duty are correlated with a right, and (ii) if the collected taxes could ensure the resources they need so that a good life could be lived (Pogge 2007, 14).

III.3. Are Negative Duties More Stringent Than the Positive Duties?

One objection to the Pogge’s position is brought by Joshua Cohen (2010), with the following example: if someone is suffering terrible and another person could end the suffering (with a minimum cost), then the last person has an obligation to act, though by acting he violates a negative duty. If he choose not to act then he could be morally blamed for the suffering that the first person experienced.

Pogge answers to Cohen by claiming that we have some well-developed psychological mechanisms that help us to avoid moral shame, and therefore positive duties. It might be assumed that negative duties are more important than positive duties because they offer motivational power to act as long as those who take part in something feel more responsible for the consequences than those who prevent.

It might be considered more important to prove that the global institutional order is unfair and it gives some advantages to some categories over others and from the moment that those who benefit from this order inflict harm on others violate a negative duty. Pogge added here that we are biologically built to prioritize negative duties and that it would be easier to do something in the case of global poverty if we knew that we are responsible by inflicting harm to the poor.

This argument is highly dependable on the idea that the institutional global order is unfair and by maintaining it we inflict harm

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3 To be consulted Daskal (2013).
on the poor. Pogge refers here to the wealthy people who see their interests and try to leave this system untouched. Assuming this important step, which is quite hard to prove, we can conclude that the rich inflict some harm on the poor because they protect these institutions, and when they get benefits from the system we cannot say that what they achieved is fair.

IV. Elites and the Institutional Global Order

One of the main assumptions we identify in Pogge’s project is that societies are guided by some institutional rules applied at a global level. Concerning this I will argue that these rules are created and consciously followed, knowing the consequences they have on people. In one of his papers, Thomas Pogge lists as examples of institutions and organizations: the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the United Nations (UN) system.

Thomas Pogge’s argument is that these institutions offer advantages and are in the interest of the wealthy and developed countries while the underdeveloped are disadvantaged by it. This system should not be interpreted as a sort of a planned conspiracy by the wealthy countries against the underdeveloped or poor countries. What we should keep in mind is that an impartial system which does not take into consideration unequal positions tends to determine a constant advantage for those who are in a better position, in this case the rich countries. This abstract idea could be seen in negotiations where a bigger and a more important partner has more power over a smaller and less important one, though the rules are the same for both. This is a fact and at a global institutional level the consequences are that the rate of development is slowed by a system which assumes that all the countries are equal although in reality they are not.

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4 This assumption is based on Pogge’s argument about the global institutional order, that can be read in his book *World Poverty and Human Rights*.

5 To be consulted Pogge (2008).
This argument based on a global institutional order suggests that it is justified to say that the rich exploit the poor thanks to the system they promote and defend.

One objection to Pogge’s argument is the fact that the global institutional order does not inflict harm on the poor. Mathias Risse (2009) claims this and he argues that we should look at the benefits this order gives to the poor and how many things have changed thanks to this order (as an example he looks at the evolution of wealth in the last 200 years). Medical progress and technological development are two other examples of how the world has advanced over the last years. Furthermore, he thinks that when we weight and judge the system we should also look at all the young people who live and who are not sick thanks to this development. Risse concentrates more on the benefits which are created by the global institutional order, hoping that in the future the problems the poor face will be solved if we allow the development to continue.

The issue here, from Pogge’s perspective, is that we must look at the current status and we must notice that in this exact moment the poor are harmed by the global institutional order the order and wealthy countries which refuse to change and to help them. The assumption, that we are not responsible in a direct way because the politicians make the decisions and not us, does not make us less responsible for doing nothing.

In the next part, we must focus on the responsibility to improve the poor’s situation. If we agree with Pogge then it’s clear that the rich have a negative duty to stop harming the poor and we can turn now to a moral practical question: What should the rich do in order to change this?

In order to answer this question, it has been argued by Pogge that some compensations could protect the poor from the inflicted harm while the rich countries could work on changing the system and the institutions. By not compensating the global poor and maintaining this global institutional order, it can be argued that we are harming the global poor and we are active participants in this crime against humanity.

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6 For a discussion in detail about this, see Steinhoff (2012).

7 In this particular case, changing means to create institutions which could eliminate the bad promoted by the current system.

8 To be consulted Pogge (2005).
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a) Duties in an Institutional Context

One objection to the Pogge line of argument, based on the main reason why the poor are in some conditions and referring to this distinction, is made by Steven Daskal. He explores other causes for their misery and suffering without denying that the current institutional order is a necessary cause but not a sufficient one taking into consideration the distinction between positive and negative duties as being conceptually confused for Pogge.

To see why I believe his formulation on this duty to be ambiguous, consider the difference between killing and failing to rescue. This is a paradigm case of negative and positive duties, one that Pogge appeals to in articulating the distinction (...) the negative duty not to kill is more stringent than the positive duty to rescue. (Daskal 2013, 8)

But Daskal argues that if we transform the duty not to kill and the duty to rescue into an institutional context (don’t participate in institutions that kill and don’t participate in institutions that fail to rescue), we cannot further argue that the negative duties are more stringent than positive duties. His point is that if we think that negative duties identify specific things that we are (negatively) obligated not to do, whereas positive duties identify specific things that we are (positively) obligated to do, then it looks that the duties not to kill, not to participate in institutions that kill and not to participate in institutions that fail to rescue are all negative duties, whereas the duty to rescue is positive.

What Daskal is trying to imply is that an important distinction between positive and negative institutional duties has been neglected, and his analysis suggests that “the negative duties engaged by global poverty, through significant, do not demand as much as typical accounts of the positive duties to eliminate poverty” (Daskal 2013, 33).

As we have seen, it has been argued by some philosophers (like Pogge) that people are poor because of the global institutional order. But one objection to Pogge position can be related to the fact that he does not explain what does he mean by global institutional order and which are the institutions that are, in fact, part of this institutional order, despite the fact that we mentioned some of them in the begin of this section.
Unfortunately, Pogge never clearly defined what the global institutional order actually includes and does not include, nor does he clearly explained what our imposition of this order upon the poor entails. Considering how important the global institutional order is to Pogge’s argument, it is surprising that he spends so little time discussing which institutions are actually part of the global institutional order and in what sense affluent, powerful countries and their citizens are responsible for maintaining and imposing them upon the global poor. (Reitberger 2008, 382)

b) Poverty Related to Natural Disasters and to the Differences Between Persons

Going beyond the issue of positive and negative institutional duties, other writers – like Polly Vizard (2006) – have tried to explain poverty referring to causes like natural disasters and differences between persons (like disabilities or brute bad luck). In this case, the distinction between people who are poor because of the global institutional order Pogge talks about and people who are just unlucky or suffer from some disability is clear. Therefore, we could say, in an indirect way that to those poor people who are unlucky and suffer because of some disability we have a positive duty while in the case of the poor whom are poor because of the current institutional order, we have a negative duty to stop harming them.

c) Poverty Due to Some Bad and Incorrect Public Policies

It has been argued by some writers, among them Julio Montero and Amartya Sen, that famine and extreme poverty are the results of some bad and incorrect public policies. Given the present problems, it is believed⁹ that most of the officials from the poor countries violate the rights of their people and do not take into consideration the national interest of their countries. Again, it is quite easy to look at what happens in these poor countries, at the level of corruption and at the political

agendas of their leaders. Compared with the idea of an unfair institutional order these facts seem more real and closer to the problems the poor face.

This argument suggests that the affluent countries are not violating the human rights of the global poor (...). Even when the global institutional order harms the economies of the poor countries and diminishes their capacity to deliver on the human rights of their citizens, poor countries could achieve this goal by adopting the necessary domestic policies, such as reducing their expenses on non-human rights-related activities, adopting redistributive policies, or, in hard times, asking for external loans. (Montero 2010, 38)

Therefore, the lack of resources are not the only factor which leads to poverty but also the national political context of their country and the political decisions of their leaders.

Pogge’s objection to Sen and Montero’s line of argument is that the global institutional order is not modeled just by the leaders from the rich countries but also by the corrupt leaders or elites of the poor countries.

d) Responsibility for Poverty Is Divided between Citizens and Elites or Politicians

In order to understand this problem, we must take into consideration an important distinction raised by Steinhoff, between us as people from a country and us as we are represented by the politicians we vote for, and who make decisions for us. Though this distinction is important and modifies the way in which we ascribe responsibility, he agrees with Pogge that there is a global institutional order which sustains poverty. The only point where he disagrees with Pogge is that it is not clear why exactly citizens, one by one, should be made responsible (38). This way he focused more on those who do actually inflict harm with their decisions, politicians and elites. They are the ones that make decisions and keep the current global institutional system, not the citizens. In other words, Steinhoff (2012, 119-38) claims that it is not the citizens from the developed countries those who harm the poor, but the
leaders and the elites from these wealthy countries are those who harm them and violate their rights, and they have a negative duty to stop.

It is assumed by Steinhoff that once you are in a certain group you adhere to its principles and beliefs, hence every member of the group is responsible for what the group is doing. The problem is that when a group makes a bad decision then all the members of the group are made responsible. Steinhoff signals to us that this is not the case with a country, for example: what happens with those who voted for the opposition? We cannot say that they adhere to the principle of the current leader, the one who won the elections. Therefore, there is no way to make them responsible for the decisions which that leader makes.

On the other hand, even if you vote for a leader, you cannot agree with all his future possible decisions or automatically adhere to all his beliefs and principles. When someone gives his vote to a leader what he is actually doing is to: “exert influence, however marginal, on who will claim to represent me and will in fact make decisions that will greatly affect me, whether I like those decisions or not. Moreover, I try to exert this influence in a situation where I know that in the end, whether I like it or not, someone will claim to represent me and make decisions in my name” (Steinhoff 2012, 135).

Pogge’s conclusion is that the responsibility for creating and maintaining poverty belongs to the wealthiest and most powerful nations, because through them a global institutional order is imposed upon the world, which envisages their own benefits. Furthermore, “this order is not spontaneous, but something that ‘we’, the citizens of wealthy countries impose through our elected governments” (Pogge 2008, 199).

Despite any problems or disadvantages caused by the present global institutional order, we must be aware that the global institutional order facilitate cooperation between the wealthy and powerful countries. This way countries can change information and work together in order to solve global problems. But, “for the global poor, the global institutional order is more or less a by-product of such negotiations”10.

Taking into consideration the present global institutional order, Pogge shows how this order should look like: wealthy people must

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10 To be consulted Reitberger (2008).
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cooperate with poor people in imposing a global institutional order; this order must be designed in a way not to lead to human rights violations and these violations be reasonable, avoidable and predictable (Pogge 2005, 60).

Conclusions

I summed up the main perspectives in which the problem of the extreme poverty could be seen as a right violation of the poor by the wealthy. I have done this by reducing the meaning of extreme poverty to a simple definition which helps us to label a person as poor: those who have no shelter, are vulnerable to diseases, have no access to education, and do not have enough food to survive, or to not suffer from malnutrition. This way the mid categories, like the poor from United States of America, are excluded from this talk.

Wealthy categories from the more developed countries have the possibility to help the poor from the less developed countries. The question is if they have a moral duty or obligation to do so and if they are directly responsible for the condition of the poor. Pogge provides some arguments to show that we have a negative duty to help the poor because the global institutional order we leave untouched inflict harm on the poor. Though this idea has its practical and theoretical advantages it is not clear how you could make responsible a particular individual from a country for inflicting harm on the poor. By examining other opinions I tried to show that Pogge’s idea raises some problems to which we should take a closer look.

I showed that we should observe the specific problems the poor are facing and to check how we could solve them and what are the alternatives, instead of focusing just on an abstract argument about the global institutional order. Maybe, by helping the poor to help themselves is better than just making them dependable on the resources they receive from the developed countries. Just how an old Chinese saying claims that: “By giving a man a fish you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.”
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