OVERCOMING IGNORANCE

The Case for a Moral Imperative to Combat Global Poverty

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THE RESPONSE OF AFFLUENT INDIVIDUALS AND COUNTRIES TO THE EXTREMES OF GLOBAL POVERTY IN TODAY'S WORLD IS IN DIRE NEED OF RECONSIDERATION. WHILE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHERS SUCH AS JOHN RAWLS AND THOMAS NAGEL ARGUE THAT OBLIGATIONS OF JUSTICE SHOULD NOT EXTEND BEYOND NATIONAL BOUNDARIES, OTHERS SUCH AS THOMAS POGGE AND PETER SINGER EMPHASIZE THAT INCREASED GLOBAL INTERDEPENDENCE HAS MADE NATIONAL BOUNDARIES IRRELEVANT FOR MATTERS OF MORALITY AND JUSTICE. INSTEAD, AFFLUENT INDIVIDUALS MUST UNDERTAKE A NEW MORAL MINDSET WHEN CONSIDERING THE ISSUE OF GLOBAL POVERTY, AND A NEW MODERATE, MORAL COSMOPOLITAN THEORY FOR JUSTICE SHOULD BE ESTABLISHED IN ORDER TO CHANGE THE STATE OF POVERTY IN OUR WORLD RADICALLY.

INTRODUCTION

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The way in which the governments and citizens of affluent countries respond to world poverty is cause for serious concern. Extreme poverty causes 18 million deaths each year. One would think that this would elicit a moral outcry and tangible response from those in the world capable of taking action, but unfortunately, this is not the case. In an increasingly globalized and interdependent world, affluent people can no longer justify their ignorance or lack of involvement in the fight to eradicate poverty. In order to address the extreme inequality present in the world today, affluent individuals must radically change their approach to moral issues. The goal of this paper is to examine the unjustified ways in which affluent individuals and their nations attempt to sidestep their moral obligation to combat extreme poverty, and to recommend a new moral outlook and international theory of justice which could change the way affluent individuals and countries react to the present state of the world.

The paper begins by addressing the excuses and assumptions that affluent citizens make to justify their failure to contribute to the alleviation of world poverty. Section two then presents the theories of two prominent political philosophers, John Rawls and Thomas Nagel, who argue that obligations of justice should not extend beyond national boundaries. In response to such theories, section three presents the work of philosophers such as Thomas Pogge and Peter Singer who strongly disagree with this nationalistic approach and argue that increased global interdependence has made national boundaries irrelevant for matters of morality and justice. Section four discusses Pogge's argument that affluent individuals need to change their moral mindset to see that combating world poverty is a moral imperative, not a mere preference. Finally, section five proposes a moderate, moral cosmopolitan theory for international justice that can change the way the world addresses inequality and global poverty, a theory which, if adopted, would radically change the world in which we live.

ASSUMPTIONS AND EXCUSES OF AFFLUENT CITIZENS

Instead of undertaking relatively simple actions to alleviate world poverty, citizens of affluent countries make excuses for their failure to act and try to distance themselves from the reality of the situation. They claim it is too costly of an undertaking even for affluent countries and that it would disadvantage the country to contribute to the cause of alleviating extreme poverty. Even worse is the apparent willful ignorance individuals assume in order to alleviate their moral obligation to help. In his book World Poverty and Human Rights, Thomas Pogge spends a significant amount of time investigating this moral failure on behalf of affluent nations and the way in which it affects-or fails to affectworld poverty. Writing in 2002, Pogge addresses the current crisis of global poverty and the way in which individuals in affluent nations deal with what he sees as the radical need for action. Answering the question of why prosperous Western countries that emphasize moral values allow such poverty, he states, "Extensive, severe poverty can continue, because we do not find its eradication morally compelling."i Until affluent countries relate themselves to situations of dire poverty, they can go on pretending they have minimal moral obligation or ability to affect the situation.

Pogge analyzes the arguments given by wealthy individuals to justify their lack of involvement. One argument is that the challenge of alleviating world poverty is such a huge undertaking that it would be an unbearable cost even for rich countries. This argument holds little water. As Pogge points out, it would take a shift of only 1.2 percent of the aggregate annual gross national incomes of the high-income economies, or 300 billion dollars annually, toward poverty eradication to bridge the gap between the poorest individuals and the \$2 PPP (purchasing power parity) a day poverty line.ⁱⁱ Philosopher Peter Singer similarly argues that "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it."iii Almost anyone would agree that a contribution of 1.2 percent would not be sacrificing anything comparable to

alleviating world poverty.

A second argument advanced by affluent countries is that history has shown that poverty cannot be eradicated by giving money to developmental aid. While it is true that sometimes anti-poverty campaigns and official development programs are unsuccessful, there are organizations that have learned from past mistakes and have taken great strides in implementing effective programs. Organizations such as Oxfam International and experienced non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are good alternatives to affluent states' official aid. In his book *One World*, Singer reiterates this sentiment and adds that the nutrition and starvation.^{vii} At the same time, however, individuals themselves need to make an effort to pay more attention. In 1995, the Washington Post conducted a survey which asked Americans their opinions about the amount of money the United States spent on foreign aid. A strong majority thought that the US was spending too much, but when asked how much of the federal budget was devoted to foreign aid, the median estimate was 20 percent, and most individuals said that a median "right amount" should be 10 percent.^{viii} In reality, the US was giving 0.10 percent of the Gross National Product, one seventh of the target percentage proposed by the United Nations.

administrative efficiency of international aid is improving. The number of people one billion dollars could sufficiently lift out of poverty more than doubled between 1990 and 1998.^{iv} The argument that international aid does little to affect poverty is refuted by the effective work done by such organizations.

The greatest moral failure on the part of wealthy indi-

viduals, however, is the lack of knowledge about—and even possible willful ignorance of—the true extent of world poverty and the steps needed to alleviate it. Pogge describes it best when he writes, "The common point is thoughtlessness."^v Most individuals in affluent societies assume that world poverty is diminishing due to the great strides taken with treaties, declarations, and the establishment of institutions such as the World Bank and the United Nations over the past 50 years. The harsh reality is that world poverty has not declined since 1987.^{vi} Part of the ignorance may be blamed on Western media. The media gives plenty of coverage to human-made horrors, but it rarely reports on the millions of ordinary deaths that occur every year due to malrealities of world poverty also contributes to the lack of involvement by affluent individuals. When a child across the world—as opposed to the child next door—is dying from starvation, it is easier to turn a blind eye to the reality and ignore the moral concern necessary. Unfortunately, this ignorance may not be accidental. Pogge argues

Ignorance of the extreme

that moral norms place the burden to protect the weak on the affluent, and—consciously or unconsciously—the strong try to avoid this burden by arranging their world to avoid the necessity to comply, "our world is arranged to keep us far away from massive and severe poverty and surrounds us with affluent, civilized people for whom the poor abroad are a remote good cause alongside the spotted owl."^{ix} Unless individuals in affluent nations expose themselves to the poverty occurring in the world, they will continue to lack the feeling of moral obligation necessary for action. 85



RAWLS AND NAGEL

The theories of some philosophers lend support to affluent individuals who do not promote or contribute to the alleviation of international poverty. Two such philosophers are John Rawls and Thomas Nagel. Rawls admits that his theory of justice as it applies to a society cannot be translated to the international level. His theory is based on starting behind the "veil of ignorance" and ignoring things which are arbitrary from a moral perspective.^x This theory, however, applies to well-ordered, ideal societies in which just institutions have already been established. After applying this theory to domestic justice, the original position can be used again at a higher level, but "the parties are representatives of peoples whose basic institutions satisfy the principles of justice selected on the first level."xi An ideal just world for Rawls would be made up of domestically just states interacting with one another.

In a non-ideal world, Rawls argues that wealthier societies are obligated to help poorer, less technologically advanced societies create just institutions. Developmental assistance should be offered so that "eventually each society now burdened by unfavorable conditions is to be raised to, or assisted towards, conditions that make a well-ordered society of peoples." Peoples and institutions, not individuals, are Rawls' moral units. As Nagel notes, Rawls believes that societies have a "moral nature" which demands equal respect as long as basic conditions of decency are met, but his equal treatment does not apply to individuals on the international level.^{xii} Individuals in a society are only responsible for justice within their political society and nothing more.

Nagel accepts Rawls' argument, and furthers the claim to national sovereignty as the bounds of obligations of justice.

He claims that affluent nations are justified in their adoption of the "political conception", in which political relation within a sovereign state determines the validity for justice. Nagel, referencing Hobbes' theory, agrees that "actual justice cannot be achieved except within a sovereign state . . . [it] requires government as an enabling condition."xiii Only in sovereign states can a fair institution for enforcing just laws exist, which permits justice to be pursued. In Nagel's view, creating institutions of this sort on the international level is not feasible. While he admits that NGOs somewhat play a role in addressing international human rights, no international institution will ever meet the level of statehood, and thus justice cannot be pursued on an international level.xiv Furthermore, he argues that any institution which intends to enact justice on an international level would demand too much authority. Prosperous nations most likely would never agree to an institution that calls for global socioeconomic justice. According to Nagel, as it is, sovereign states are only responsible for their own justice.

Nagel's view of "political conception" develops in greater detail this relationship between sovereign states and justice. The political conception holds that sovereign states place individuals in a unique political relationship, which they share only with one another and in which justice occurs; "justice is something we owe through our shared institutions only to those with whom we stand in a strong political relation."^{XV} Socioeconomic justice, in particular, applies only to members of the same political association. Responsibility to alleviate poverty in other countries would therefore lie outside the responsibilities of individuals as they are only responsible for those members within their own sovereign state. Nagel believes that "[this] political conception is accepted by most people in the privileged nations of the world, so that, true or false, it will have a signif-

"The reasonable ease with which aid can be given internationally on behalf of affluent individuals makes contributing ... an act of moral duty." icant role in determining what happens."xvi Global governance would place more obligations and responsibilities on prosperous nations. Nagel argues that not only governments, but citizens of such nations, desire to avoid such obligations. The theories of Nagel and Rawls therefore support citizens of affluent nations who wish to justify their lack of involvement in international moral issues such as alleviating poverty.

THE EFFECTS OF GLOBAL INTERDEPENDENCE

While Rawls and Nagel make compelling arguments with their respective philosophies, they are ultimately incomplete and inapplicable in today's global society. The effects of rapid globalization over the past 50 years have changed the nature of how philosophers and individuals must look at the question of justice, particularly in the international realm. Increased interdependence between nations has pushed the moral boundary of obligation into a sphere of justice extending beyond country lines. As Pogge writes, "because all human beings are now participants in a single, global institutional order . . . all unfulfilled human rights have come to be, at least potentially, everyone's responsibility."xvii

This argument is adamantly supported by Singer and Beitz. Singer does not see distance as a moral justification for failing to aid others, particularly when there are agencies which can translate assistance to the global level.^{xviii} He also confronts affluent citizens on their hypocrisy in claiming that all humans are equal and have certain rights, yet who continue to give money to their domestic poor who have their basic needs fulfilled and are only poor compared to a high standard of living. Singer uses an analogy of a small child drowning in a pond and a person choosing not to wade into the pond to save the child because he does not want to get his shoes and pants wet to criticize affluent nations for failing to give more internationally to alleviate global poverty: If we do this when people are in danger of dying of starvation and when there are agencies that can, with reasonable efficiency, turn our modest donations of money into lifesaving food and basic medicines, how can we consider ourselves any better than the person who sees the child fall in the pond and walks on?xix

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The reasonable ease with which aid can be given internationally on behalf of affluent individuals makes contributing—in Singer's view—not just an act of charity, but an act of moral duty.

Singer also makes a very compelling argument as to why using national boundaries as the limits of justice is morally unjust. If justice applies only to individuals we are associated with through national institutions, as Nagel argues, then the question of international refugees presents a moral dilemma. If we deny entrance to our country to poor refugees who want to become a part of-and contribute to-our national institutions and associations, and therefore be a part of the association through which they receive justice, it would be unfair to discriminate against them because they are not part of a community to which we denied them admission.xx This mindset is characterized as "exclusionary patriotism" by Charles Jones. Such a philosophy "seems to commit one to [the] belief that gaining membership in a country would somehow have the effect of turning one into a subject of ethical concern."xxi When members of wealthy countries deny assistance to poor refugees-individuals who would not be allowed to be a part of their associative institutions-they are really claiming that there is little ethical value to their plight.

The lives of these individuals unworthy of ethical reflection are inherently tied to affluent countries due to the increase in economic interdependence on the international level. Beitz believes that economic interdependence places worse-off countries in involuntary relationships with more affluent countries.^{xxii} Beitz argues that this association undermines the argument that Nagel and Rawls make about sovereign nations being the only institution where justice 88

resides. For this reason, Beitz reinterprets Rawls' theory of justice on an international level, arguing that interdependence has created a global scheme of social cooperation, in which national boundaries no longer hold moral significance. "Since boundaries are not coextensive with the scope of social cooperation, they do not mark the limits of social obligations . . . The veil of ignorance must extend to all matters of national citizenship, and the principles chosen will therefore apply globally." xxiii In an interdependent world, nationality has become arbitrary from a moral perspective, and it therefore must be ignored in Rawls' original position.

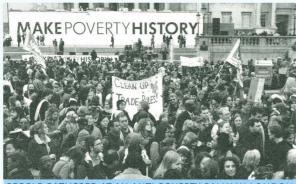
Rawls and Nagel also argue that it is not the responsibility of individuals to be concerned about moral issues, and the only way to address justice is through institutions. Indeed, citizens of affluent nations often invoke this assumption to argue that assistance is pointless because the fault lies not with their own institutions, but with the bad governments and corruption in poorer countries. Rawls argues that the focus in international justice, therefore, should be attempting to assist these governments in becoming stable institutions within their own nations. This concentration on local domestic issues, Pogge suggests, is what makes it "convenient of us citizens of wealthy countries . . . to ignore such interdependencies."xxiv And while affluent citizens point the finger of blame at corrupt governments and urge assistance for internal institutional reform in such nations, world poverty and malnutrition continues to afflict millions. "We should not, then, think of our individual donations and of possible institutionalized poverty eradication initiatives ... as helping the poor, but as protecting them from the effects of global rules whose injustice benefits us and is our responsibility."xxv Non-domestic institutions have a great effect on human lives, particularly in poorer and weaker countries. Global rules of governance, trade, and diplomacy, in which wealthy nations "enjoy a crushing advantage in bargaining power and expertise," play a major role in maintaining the persistence of global poverty.xxvi As Pogge rightly suggests, "the affluent in the developed countries may be practicing a morally untenable nationalism by coercively upholding a badly slanted global order in which the human rights of millions of foreigners are unfulfilled."xxvii

A NEW MORAL MINDSET

So what are citizens of affluent countries supposed to do? A change in how moral situations are approached should be the first step. Pogge discusses the nature of positive and negative duties that are part of the normal moral thinking of individuals. In doing so, he rightfully attempts to show that while a positive moral duty of helping out the poor is a decent act, there is a much stronger negative duty not to bring undue harm unto others—which is what our current global economic system does. Such a proposal rightfully puts individuals in affluent societies under an unavoidable moral demand to work toward alleviating world poverty.

Pogge's theory begins by laying out his interpretation of ordinary moral thinking. Moral thinking involves a hierarchy of moral reasons, which can be broken down into 2 parts: (I) negative duties not to wrong (unduly harm) others; and (2) a spectrum of positive duties—with the highest priority being a positive duty to protect one's next of kin from wrongdoing, followed by protecting one's compatriots, and ending with protecting unrelated foreigners.xxviii According to Pogge, the strength of the moral reason not to unduly harm others—a negative duty—does not differentiate if the victim is a compatriot or a foreigner. So, while it may be more morally important to assist our compatriots when one is called to act on a positive duty, undue harm against individuals shows no regard for proximity or relation.xxix

Proving there is a positive moral duty for individuals of affluent nations to work towards alleviating world poverty does not pose much of a challenge for Pogge. Most affluent peoples would agree that extreme poverty, by nature, is a moral injustice, and that, being much better off than poorer individuals, we could somewhat alleviate their suffering and protect them from this injustice without becoming badly off ourselves.^{XXX} Singer has similarly made the argument that morally we ought to prevent something bad from happening if it is in our power, and we do not sacrifice anything of comparable moral importance.xxxi Pogge argues, however, that this positive moral duty is a weak claim on individuals and will not necessarily translate to international aid. First, many do not feel compelled to promote worthy causes, and therefore will not do so. Secondly, since aid to foreigners and strangers falls at the bottom of the positive duty spectrum, many individuals will promote local interests or causes of their choice such as churches or cancer research.xxxii When extreme international injustice is seen only in terms of a positive duty-as Pogge believes many people see it-it is placed at the bottom of their list, and less extreme wrongs in their community or country take preference.xxxiii If only a positive duty is placed on affluent individuals, the chance of aid going to world poverty is not very high.



PEOPLE GATHERED AT AN ANTI-POVERTY RALLY IN LONDON

Pogge therefore sets out to qualify assistance toward alleviating global poverty as a negative moral duty, which requires action on behalf of citizens of affluent nations. As previously stated, many individuals see world poverty as a positive duty that—although wrong—does not take overall precedence, since they themselves are not doing undue harm in the situation.^{xxxiv} In a world comprised of self-sufficient, sovereign nations—such as Rawls' ideal world there would be no problem with this moral justification. In reality, however, increased interdependence has created a world in which the institutions of affluent nations do affect global poverty. Unfortunately, "citizens and governments of the affluent countries-whether intentionally or notare imposing a global institutional order that foreseeably and avoidably reproduces severe and widespread poverty."xxxv So, while the existence of global inequality may not be enough to constitute a negative duty on affluent individuals, the existence of shared institutions that contribute to global poverty and create an extremely unbalanced global order makes assistance a moral obligation. Although individuals may not be able to avoid living under such institutions, they are able to counteract the consequences of these institutions by working toward institutional reform to protect peoples living in extreme poverty. They can do this by contributing to organizations such as Oxfam and other NGOs.xxxvi Citizens of affluent nations need to change their moral mindset to no longer see global poverty as a positive moral duty that they should work to eradicate, but in terms of a negative moral duty that must be addressed immediately.

A MODERATE MORAL COSMOPOLITANISM

In order to change the way moral issues are addressed throughout the world, affluent countries must adopt a new theory for international justice. A strong case can be made for a cosmopolitan conception of justice, a theory supported by numerous philosophers. According to Pogge, all cosmopolitan theories share three elements: individualism (units of concern are individual human beings), universality (unit of concern attaches to every individual equally), and generality (individuals are ultimate units of concern for everyone).xxxvii Under this general umbrella of cosmopolitanism exist unique variants, one of which is defined as moral cosmopolitanism, or cosmopolitanism of justice. Pogge's moral cosmopolitanism holds that all persons "are required to respect one another's status as ultimate units of moral concern-a requirement that imposes limits on our conduct and, in particular, on our efforts to construct institutional schemes."xxxviii Similarly, Samuel Scheffler proposes cosmopolitanism of justice in which "the idea of



world citizenship means that the norms of justice must ultimately be seen as governing the relations of all human beings to each other, and not merely as applying within individual societies or bounded groups of other kinds."XXXIX In short, cosmopolitanism in terms of justice calls for equal moral weight for all individuals, irrespective of nationality or political association.

An extreme view of this cosmopolitanism would deny the existence of partiality for compatriots or special relationships of any kind when making moral decisions. Both Scheffler and Pogge reject this extreme version. Scheffler, instead, calls for a more moderate cosmopolitanism. This moderate view admits that there is a fundamental distinction between global justice and social justice, "even at the level of basic principle, and it accepts that the members of an individual society owe each other some things, as a matter of justice, that they do not owe to non-members."xl According to Scheffler, special relationships inherently create unequal treatment, and it would be unnatural to view these special relationships only for their instrumentaland not personal-value.xli The ultimate goal of his moderate cosmopolitanism approach to justice is to "devise human institutions, practices, and ways of life that take seriously the equal worth of persons without undermining people's capacity to sustain their special loyalties and attachments."xlii

A natural follow-up question to Scheffler's approach is whether there is justification for his proposed partiality. Numerous philosophers support the notion that although a cosmopolitan view of justice is ideal, exceptions for partiality in domestic and special relationships are natural and allowed. Singer argues that we ought to prevent wrongs from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, but also acknowledges that "few human beings can live happy and fulfilled lives without being attached to particular other human beings."xliii He admits that even from an impartial standpoint, these special relationships should not be taken away. Although a strong opponent of Rawls and Nagel's insistence on national boundaries of justice, Beitz also concedes that "the influence of international principles should be constrained, in cases of conflict, by one's responsibilities to one's own compatriots."^{xliv} These philosophers, along with Scheffler, agree that a cosmopolitan system of international justice, in which individuals have the human rights of everyone in mind while still holding some partiality for special relationships, can be morally justified. The key is to create a balance that fulfills both the moral obligation for international justice and the partiality required in special relationships.

Pogge's goal with his moral cosmopolitanism is to find a moderate view in which the demands on affluent individuals are not too costly. To find this moderate view, he first differentiates between an "interactional" conception of justice and an "institutional" conception of justice. The interactional conception places direct responsibility for human rights on individuals, while the institutional conception places responsibility on institutional schemes, and indirectly on the individuals who help to maintain such institutions.xlv While mutually complementary, Pogge argues that promoting an institutional conception of moral cosmopolitanism will provide a more effective and overarching morality. In the interactional conception, individuals are only responsible for their own actions. If, however, the institutional conception were implemented, a sort of system of checks and balances would exist in which fellow individuals encourage morality under a shared institutional responsibility. The benefit of this intermediate institutional concept, in Pogge's view, is that:

It goes beyond simple libertarianism, according to which we may ignore harms that we do not directly bring about, without falling into a utilitarianism of rights, which commands us to take full account of all relevant harms whatsoever, regardless of our causal relation to them.^{xlvi}

Such an approach allows affluent individuals to be a part of an institution that promotes morality, but spreads the associated burden of moral responsibility amongst all individuals in an institution. Affluent individuals can live in a society where international justice is upheld without incurring great personal cost.

VII. CONCLUSION

Global poverty and inequality have reached such an extreme in today's world that affluent individuals can no longer justify their ignorance and failure to act. While Rawls and Nagel present strong arguments for national boundaries of justice, their theories can no longer hold water in an increasingly interdependent world. A new moral mindset and a new cosmopolitan theory for international justice must quickly be adopted if the world hopes to overcome the destitution that global poverty has created. In the present system, things look bleak for individuals of underdeveloped countries, but there is hope. Affluent citizens have not only the ability but the moral obligation to contribute towards the eradication of global poverty, and if they fulfill this moral duty, a seemingly impossible task could be achieved.

ENDNOTES

i. Pogge (3) ii. Pogge (7) iii. Singer 1972 (231) iv. Singer 2002 (190) v. Pogge (145) vi. Pogge (99) vii. Pogge (98) viii. Singer 2002 (183) ix. Pogge (26) x. Rawls 1999 (11) xi. Rawls 1993 (36-68) xii. Nagel (134) xiii. Nagel (114) xiv. Nagel (132) xv. Nagel (121) xvi. Nagel (126) xvii. Pogge (171) xviii. Singer 1972 (232) xix. Singer 2002 (157) xx. Singer 2002 (170) xxi. Jones (128) xxii. Beitz 1975 (374) xxiii. Beitz 1979 (151) xxiv. Pogge (49) xxv. Pogge (23) xxvi. Pogge (20) xxvii. Pogge (129)

xxviii. Pogge (132) xxix. Pogge (132) xxx. Pogge (197) xxxi. Singer 1972 (231) xxxii. Pogge (198) xxxiii. Pogge (133) xxxiv. Pogge (133) xxxv. Pogge (201) xxxvi. Pogge (136) xxxvii. Pogge (169) xxxviii. Pogge (169) xxxix. Scheffler (114) xl. Scheffler (116) xli. Scheffler (121) xlii. Scheffler (129) xliii. Singer 2002 (162) xliv. Beitz (208) xlv. Pogge (170) xlvi. Pogge (171)

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