

**HOW CAN THE DUTY TO HELP THE POOR BE JUSTIFIED?  
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE ARGUMENTS OF THOMAS POGGE AND  
PETER SINGER**

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*Abstract: The paper analyzes the works of Thomas Pogge and Peter Singer, two scholars that are members of the "moral cosmopolitanism" camp. Despite of them being part of the same camp, the arguments used by them to convince "us", people and governments of rich countries, that we have a duty to assist the poor are very different. As it will be demonstrated, the argument of Thomas Pogge is mainly based on the idea of us having a negative duty not to harm the poor, while Peter Singer is more for a positive duty based on impartiality.*

*Moreover, it can be said that the two answer totally different to the question what kind of global justice is needed in order to eradicate poverty. Thomas Pogge seems to be favoring a limited global justice defined in terms of a global order that is just, while Peter Singer prefers a redistributive global justice that has as main objective the construction of a world community in which people are responsible for one another no matter where they live, what their nationality is and what values they cherish.*

**Keywords:** *Thomas Pogge, Peter Singer, poverty, cosmopolitanism, global justice.*

### **Thomas Pogge and the duty to help the poor**

The problem of how to justify the duty to assist the poor has been a constant issue addressed in Thomas Pogge's writings. In articles such as: *Severe Poverty as a Human Rights Violation, World Poverty and Human Rights* and "*Assisting*" *the Global Poor*, Thomas Pogge has tried to see why poverty still remains a problem unaddressed properly at the international level despite the progress witnessed in technology. His aim is to find moral arguments that would convince the people and states that they have a duty to combat poverty. Probably the best well-know work of Pogge is *World Poverty and Human Rights. Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms*, a book that encompasses some of his articles written between 1990 and 2000.

Dismissing the four main arguments that are always invoked in order not to help the poor in other countries, Thomas Pogge tries to convince us that there is so little that would be needed in order to change the current state of affairs concerning poverty. If poverty is still a feature of the world we live in, this is because "groups live in mutual isolation and lack vivid awareness of each other's circumstances, experiences and perspectives on the world. We live in extreme isolation from severe poverty"<sup>1</sup>. This quotation leads us to the idea that as long as people are not aware they will not act, but one may ask if knowing is enough in order for people to be concerned, and whether what is missing is not the direct effect of poverty on citizens of the rich world.

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<sup>1</sup> Pogge, T., *World poverty and Human Rights. Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 4.

His entire conception of human rights and justice at the international level is based on the idea of negative duties: “specific minimal constraints- more minimal in the case of human rights- on what harms persons may inflict upon the others”<sup>2</sup>. His central argument for helping the poor is that it is wrong to harm people for the sake of obtaining material gains, because in this way we deny them the access to the objects of their most basic human rights. We should allow people to flourish and to have the possibility of fulfilling their human rights, be they civil and political rights or economic and social ones.

Pogge defines justice as being “equitable treatment of persons and groups”<sup>3</sup>, and this definition makes it possible for him to relate the idea of how the current world order is constructed to the one of the injustice of this world order in which not all people are treated the same. The institutional interconnections that exist in our world today mean in practice that states affect one another, a causal link that makes him propose that we need a single, universal criterion of justice. He declares that states cannot “peacefully agree to disagree about justice” just because they have different characteristics in terms of culture, economy, geography. Although one can see him arguing in favor of a moral universal conception of human rights, he seems to be missing the point that despite all interconnections, states still maintain a national conception of what good and justice mean and that globalization did not make obsolete the power of the nation-state.

In order to justify the need for economic and social rights, Pogge points out that the absence of these rights in today’s world also makes it impossible for some people to fulfill their civil and political rights<sup>4</sup>. He gives to human rights an institutional definition and considers them as being “claims on coercive social institutions and as claims against those who uphold such institutions”<sup>5</sup>. In this context, what is needed for human rights to be fulfilled is just a negative obligation not to impose coercion on the others through institutions. Therefore, Western states are the ones to be blamed for the under-fulfillment of the human rights by imposing an economic order which is not just as well as the citizens of the rich countries by not questioning the existence of such institutions.

In his opinion, neither civil and political rights nor economic and social rights can but be expressed in terms of negative duties. Consequently, we consider that he has a limited vision of what international social justice would mean and one can even state that he is arguing more in favor of a procedural justice at the international level, a justice that would require the same rules to be applied to everyone. It might be argued at this point that the global justice he has in mind does not guarantee that the outcomes are going to be the same or that the conditions for improving the situation of poor are going to be more favorable than in the present state of affairs.

Even his solution to the world poverty, namely the so called Global Resource Dividend, can be justified as a negative obligation: not to deny the others’ rights to use natural resources only because they are now incapable of using them. Therefore, his proposal is to institute a global levy on the use of some valuable resources and to use the money thus

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<sup>2</sup> Pogge, T., *World poverty and Human Rights. Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Pogge, T., *World poverty and Human Rights. Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms*, 31.

<sup>4</sup> Pogge, T., “Priorities of Global Justice”, in *Global justice* edited by Pogge, T. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Pogge, T., *World poverty and Human Rights. Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms*, 45.

obtained in order to eradicate global poverty. As can be noticed, his proposal is still one based on the existence of the nation-states system, a proposal that proves that his understanding of the global justice is limited to the idea of redistribution among states and not one that encompasses the idea of a world community, a community in which all people are responsible for each other<sup>6</sup>.

Another argument that he brings in order to assess our duty to help the poor is his understanding of moral universalism, a concept that is today accepted and means in principle that all human beings have an equal moral status<sup>7</sup>. Social justice can be said to be moral if: it subjects all persons to the same fundamental principles, these principles assign the same benefits and burdens to all and discriminations must be justified. If national economic order needs to be just, so does the international economic one. Preference for our compatriots is allowed in his view just as long as we do not harm the people of other states. The current economic order perpetuates global inequality and as such needs to be rejected by states and citizens alike. Even though one can say that there are some differences between the national and international economic order and that the problem of injustice at the national level still has flaws, for Pogge differences of language, ethnicity or history are irrelevant. But one is not wrong to say that these commonalities still matter a lot for people, as the conception of the nation-state is still much embedded in our way of thinking.

The general solution that Thomas Pogge finds as a response to poverty is a change in the institutions that comprise the current global order in order to allow justice to come at the surface. Although he recognizes that the hardest thing to do would be to convince states to act in this way, one might also say that blaming Western states for the poverty is only half of the story and that no global economic order that is totally just is ever going to be found, as states will always feel and take advantage of the disparities and differences that exist among them. This grey picture may seem very pessimistic but correctly reflect the mere reality. At this criticism Pogge would probably answer that “whether or not we accept such a negative duty in regard to the justice of our global order makes a momentous moral difference”<sup>8</sup> and that should be enough to act against global poverty.

### **Peter Singer and the duty to help the poor**

Starting to be concerned about global poverty since the 1970s, the main arguments of Peter Singer concerning our duty to help the poor are exposed in articles such as *Famine, Affluence and Morality* written in 1972, or more recently in the book entitled *One world. The ethics of globalization*. The main idea that links all the works of Peter Singer is that poverty should be eradicated and that this will be possible if we can imagine ourselves living in one world, or as he puts it “how well we come through the era of globalization will depend on how we respond ethically to the idea that we live in one world”<sup>9</sup>.

Arguing just like Thomas Pogge that eradicating poverty would cost us so little today, Peter Singer gives a number of reasons why we, again the people of the West and of the rich

<sup>6</sup> Pogge, T., *World poverty and Human Rights. Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms*, 176.

<sup>7</sup> Pogge, T., *World poverty and Human Rights. Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms*, 92.

<sup>8</sup> Pogge, T., *World poverty and Human Rights. Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms*, 133.

<sup>9</sup> Singer, P., *One world. The ethics of globalization* (United States: Yale University Press, 2002), 13.

countries, have a duty to assist the poor. As he acknowledges that states are unlikely to change their policies of giving aid, the only hope for saving the poor from death rests in us, normal citizens.

While not really addressing the problem of what are the causes of poverty in today's world, one can induce from his writing that the main cause is that "wealth is so unequal distributed that a typical affluent couple in one country spends more on going to the theater than many in other countries have to live on for a full year"<sup>10</sup>. One may infer from this that Singer is an adept of the left wing, because what he envisions is equal distribution of wealth among the citizens of the world community. Although no one is specifically indicated by him as being responsible for the current situation related to poverty, he acknowledges that global economic institutions are not the best ones to indicate as promoters of global economic justice.

His whole argument in favor of a complete redistributive justice starts from the idea that although we are not living in a global political community, there have been many changes in our understanding of sovereignty. Globalization should provide us with the sense that we live in a global community in which solutions to some problems can be found only in common. Moreover, he states that we should not regret the era of independent sovereign states, an idea that brings to the fore the fact that he is taking for granted the idea that the international system based as the "international" term suggests on nation states is gone. Many would question this statement by pointing out that even if environmental problems may show that problems are common, not the same can be said about poverty, a domain that differs in that only some suffer while others would have to bear the costs.

Singer argues for global redistributive justice speaking in terms of positive duties that we have towards people in the world. Recognizing that most of the time we rather help our own, he talks of this stance as being a wrong one for if we consider human rights as being universal and that all human life is equal, we should not give preference to our compatriots<sup>11</sup>. If poverty leads to death, than impartiality is the principle that should guide our decision of whom to help and if people are dying somewhere else than in your own country, then your money should go where there it is more need. This ideas point out to the utilitarianist stance that Peter Singer adopts when arguing in favor of redistributive justice, a stance that is exemplified by his idea 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"<sup>12</sup>. If there are no beneficial consequences of refusal to give money, then we, the citizens and not the governments, should do it.

Peter Singer also questions the whole idea of the nation state which dominates our thinking today and which determines us to help more our compatriots, as he sees the nation not as a community of reciprocity but rather as an imagined community, using the framework provided by Benedict Anderson. If this is the case, his conclusion is that we can imagine ourselves as members of any other community and consequently members of a global community. If we are all members of one community then the distributive principles that

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<sup>10</sup> Singer, P., *One world. The ethics of globalization*, 172.

<sup>11</sup> Singer, P., *One world. The ethics of globalization*, 152.

<sup>12</sup> Singer, P., "Famine, Affluence and Morality", in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1972): 2.

apply at the national level should also apply at the international level. Singer even goes at the extreme saying that people should make their best, even giving all that is not spent for necessities to the poor<sup>13</sup>. This means that he is proposing a redistributive global justice that would provide the same outcomes for all and that this global justice should be managed by international institutions that should be strengthened. His ideas not only sounds utopian and did not convince the world to act in this way from the 1970s until now, but at the same time encourages one to see Peter Singer as a socialist thinker that takes as assumption the fact that people are indeed that altruistic to apply his ideas in reality.

### **Similarities and differences between the two arguments**

As a first remark, one may say that there are quite a few differences between the works of the two authors, although both are seen as exposing moral arguments in favor of helping the poor of the world. The first difference between the two authors and one that actually has a great impact in the way they are justifying the duty to assist the poor is the reasons why we are facing today so much poverty. While Thomas Pogge clearly states that the one to be blamed for poverty is the global economic order and this leads to an argument in favor of reforming the institutions as a solution to eradicate poverty, Peter Singer's position at this stage is not that clear. Very vaguely, Singer states that global economic institutions are to be blamed, but the solution that he gives to poverty is in no way related to this. It also makes one think whether it is not possible to see Pogge being preoccupied more with the global order that needs to be just, if that is ever possible, while Singer is more concerned about redistributive justice, a justice that does not depend on how the global order is and how powerful states are but rather is related to our sense of humanity.

Regarding the justifications provided by the two authors for our duty to protect the poor, one can not but notice the different arguments that the two authors bring to the fore. While Pogge offers a definition of human rights that is mainly expressed in terms of a negative duty not to do harm to the poor, Singer's argument is much more based on the idea of impartiality in what regards our positive obligations to help the poor. Pogge is favoring a simple argument that we have the duty to act so as not to harm others. Singer goes further by arguing that we should actually take positive steps in what regards the eradication of poverty, mainly by giving money to the poor. This difference shows us that Pogge takes rather a minimalist position in what regards our duty to help the poor, while the maximalist position corresponds to the arguments of Peter Singer. Pogge is arguing for equal opportunities to be provided for all, while not guaranteeing the same outcomes like Peter Singer envisages. For all these, one can say that Peter Singer's argument would fit perfect into the camp of those who favor redistributive global justice, while Pogge is more to be seen as being part of the camp that argues for procedural global justice. This idea becomes even more obvious if one thinks that Singer considers that the system of redistribution that works at the national level can be transposed at the international level. In this sense, Thomas Pogge's position seems to be more moderate as a reform of the global institutions and equal access to the objects of people's right is all that is needed in his opinion in order to solve the global poverty problem.

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<sup>13</sup> Singer, P., "The Singer Solution to world poverty", in *The New York Times Magazine* (September 5, 1999): 63.

The need for one standard of justice as a base for helping the poor is addressed in a similar way by the two authors. Peter Singer says that we should work for ethical foundations of a world community, ethical foundations that would see all people as having the same value in terms of their life and which will lead in time to the vision of one world. At this point, Pogge is more moderate as all he is prepared to argue in favor of are some fundamental principles that would have the role of not discriminating among the people's rights, of not applying double standards. But both of them have at the basis of the standard of justice the principle of impartiality.

Both authors present as an argument for eradicating poverty the fact that now we have the material conditions to do so and that it would actually take very little from us to help the poor. What is missing in today's world for this desiderata to become reality is the moral conditions and assumptions which did not change as much as one would have thought. Globalization is seen by both authors as an argument that deserves to be mentioned in convincing the states and citizens that they should act. But at the same time, Pogge also blames in a way globalization for being a cause for poverty as global decisions affect policies of states that did not expressly agree to those international rules.

Using the distinction made by Thomas Pogge between libertarianism, institutionalism and utilitarianism and considering that he is positioning himself in the institutionalism camp, we can depict another difference in the arguments' of the two authors. Pogge defines human rights in an institutional manner, while Singer seems to understand human rights in the classical interactional way. Also, while Peter Singer takes a utilitarian stance in arguing in favor of helping the poor, Pogge sees this duty as being related to the way institutions are designed today.

A similarity between the two scholars is their common view on the limitations of our preference for compatriots. This argument dismisses the idea that we should help our compatriots because we have a special kind of obligation towards them. Both Pogge and Singer admit that there are circumstances in which indeed we should give preference to compatriots, but these circumstances are different, for while Pogge says that we can favor any time our co-nationals as long as we do not harm others, Singer adopts a more radical stance when he says that preference is allowed but only in what regards the relations inside the family and not outside of it. Furthermore, one can say that both writers believe that the nation-states system should be questioned, though Singer seems to be more radical than Pogge as he already sees the nation state as being an obsolete framework and envisions a global community where citizens are responsible for one another. At this point, Pogge seems to prefer a concept of global justice where responsibility for eradicating global poverty does not necessarily rests on ordinary citizens but on states.

A criticism that can be addressed to both of the authors is that they do not actually say how all these generous ideas are going to convince the states and the citizens of the rich states. While talking and arguing in favor of helping the poor can be seen as the first step in a long road that would lead in the end to some kind of justice at the international level, the gap between theory and practice remains very large.

**Conclusions**

The problem of poverty is well known today, the number of people dying every year because of problems related to poverty is also very easy to count, but despite all these facts and figures, concrete and serious solutions to this problem have not been found until today. Or better said, they have not even been searched for thoroughly.

The theories of Thomas Pogge and Peter Singer, although different in substance and in the arguments that they present in favor of helping the poor, are not incompatible. Both authors envision a world in which global economic justice would reduce the number of poor, although it is clear that while Thomas Pogge adopts an institutional stance, Singer gives preference to a utilitarian argument for eradicating poverty. In terms of the quality of the arguments used, Thomas Pogge develops a stronger theory and one that goes more in depth in what regards the moral problems raised by poverty.

If we take into account the fact that Singer has made his arguments public from the 70's and nothing changed, the question that remains to be answered is how much do we have to wait until poverty is seriously addressed at the international level and if there are better arguments than these to convince the world to act? Hopefully the more recent argument of a negative duty to help the poor developed by Thomas Pogge has better chances of catching the attention of citizens of the rich countries as it does not ask from them as much as Singer does. Only the future will decide the force and solidity of the arguments of the two authors for eradicating global poverty.

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