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24.02 Moral Problems and the Good Life  
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## Radical Inequality and the Global Resources Dividend

### I. Global Suffering and our Duties: What is the nature of our duty to aid?

Singer has reminded us that suffering and death from famine and lack of health care is very bad. On his consequentialist view, we should each do a lot to help remedy this. O'Neill took a Kantian approach and suggested that although we are morally required to avoid exploiting others who are vulnerable, and morally required to keep our commitments to others with whom we have special relationships, morality does not require that we give large sums to prevent the suffering of distant strangers. We can be criticized morally for being stingy or lacking beneficence if we ignore great need, but we may be selective in our charity.

Pogge recognizes the attraction of both Singer's and O'Neill's views: he allows that it is tempting to think, with O'Neill, that our duties to relieve global poverty are not what she calls *perfect duties*. Recall that perfect duties are requirements such that failure to fulfill them constitutes a moral wrong. Some philosophers have argued that the only perfect duties are *negative*, i.e., they set prohibitions on us corresponding to the rights of others; in effect, they are duties of non-interference. On this view, there are no perfect *positive* duties; positive duties—primarily duties to aid—are always “discretionary.”

Pogge ultimately sides with Singer, however, in thinking that our duty to address global poverty is a perfect duty: it is not optional. However, he shifts the emphasis from individuals to states. The duties arise due to structural injustices. He argues that although it appears that in giving aid to the global poor affluent countries are being generous and beneficent, in fact the global poor have a right to aid given the structures and institutions that are responsible for the hardship they suffer.

### II. What circumstances are so dire that we have a perfect duty to prevent them? Under what conditions does someone have a claim against us to relieve their suffering?

#### A. Radical inequality

“The phenomenon of global poverty clearly exemplifies radical inequality as defined [by the following conditions].” (Pogge 60)

1. The worse-off are very badly off in absolute terms.
2. They are also very badly off in relative terms—very much worse off than many others.
3. The inequality is *impervious*: It is difficult or impossible for the worse-off substantially to improve their lot; and most of the better-off never experience life at the bottom for even a few months and have no vivid idea of what it is like to live that way.
4. The inequality is *pervasive*: It concerns not merely some aspects of life, such as the climate or access to natural beauty or high culture, but most aspects or all.
5. The inequality is *avoidable*: The better-off can improve the circumstances of the worse-off without becoming badly off themselves.

Pogge argues that radical inequality does not give rise to a negative duty to prevent it. His example: ...suppose we discovered people on Venus who are very badly off, and suppose we could help them at little cost to ourselves. If we did nothing, we would surely violate a positive duty of beneficence. But we would not be violating a negative duty of justice, because we would not be *contributing* to the perpetuation of their misery. (61)

What, if anything, in addition to radical inequality gives rise to duties of justice?

#### B. The effects of shared institutions (61)

*Magnate*: suppose Winthrop and Joe have similar talents and abilities, but Winthrop has inherited great wealth and power and Joe has not. Winthrop controls what jobs there are and how much people are paid in the jobs; Winthrop also has tremendous influence over the political situation

due to the fact that his family holds all the local wealth. He keeps Joe and his ilk poor and overworked and prevents legislation from being passed that would give Joe greater opportunities through education, training, relocation, etc.

In *Magnate*, does Winthrop violate duties of justice towards Joe, or would we say that only fails to be beneficent? Pogge thinks that the situation of the affluent countries with respect to the poor countries is analogous to Winthrop and Joe:

“The worse-off are not merely poor and often starving, but are *being* impoverished and starved under our shared institutional arrangements, which inescapably shape their lives.” (63)

C. *Uncompensated exclusion from the use of shared resources (63)*

*Bully Brother*: Suppose Suzie and George’s parents tell them that when they get home from school they should make snacks for themselves from what’s in the kitchen. George is bigger than Suzie and beats her up if she tries to enter the kitchen to make her snack, so she never gets an after-school snack. She is hungry and grumpy when the parents get home, so she gets into trouble, has difficulty with her homework, and is punished for bad behavior.

Another analogy? “...the citizens and governments of the affluent states are therefore violating a negative duty of justice when they, in collaboration with the ruling elites of the poor countries, coercively exclude the poor from a proportional resources share.” (64-5)

D. *Effects of a common and violent history (65)*

Can you come up with an analogy?

### III. Proposal: Global Resources Dividend?

Pogge proposes, primarily in response to (C), but having results that address (B) and (D), that “Those who make more extensive use of our planet’s resources would compensate those who, involuntarily, use very little.” What is the idea?

The GRD proposal envisions that states and their citizens’ governments shall not have full libertarian property rights with respect to the natural resources in their territory, but can be required to share a small part of the value of any resources they decide to use or sell. This payment they must make is called a dividend because it is based on the idea that the global poor own an inalienable stake in all limited natural resources.” (66)

Desiderata:

“Proceeds from the GRD are to be used toward ensuring that all human beings will be able to meet their own basic needs with dignity.” (67-8)

- The GRD should be easy to understand and to apply; administration should be cheap and transparent.
- Disbursement rules should reward progress in eradicating domestic poverty.
- The impact of the GRD on the price of goods consumed to satisfy basic needs should be low.
- It should be focused on resources whose use should be limited for conservation and environmental protection.

Pogge estimates (this was in 2002) that with a \$.05 increase in the cost of petroleum products, enough could be raised to “make a phenomenal difference to the poor even within a few years.” (67).

### IV. Questions

1. Is global poverty the result of injustice? Do affluent countries have duties of justice to remedy it?
2. Even if affluent countries have responsibilities toward poor countries, is it just to require citizens of the affluent countries to pay taxes to right a past injustice? Why should citizens have to suffer for what others have done? (Isn’t all taxation theft?)
3. Don’t affluent countries already given huge amounts of aid to developing countries? Isn’t this sufficient to fulfill our responsibilities? And if it isn’t working, why should we throw more money at the problem?