

Collective Responsibility for Severe Poverty

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Abstract: Thomas Pogge has argued powerfully for the view that states which are responsible for severe poverty collectively share this responsibility. I claim that this rough equality of collective responsibility is not compelling. Relevant states may share collective responsibility for severe poverty, but some states possess much more responsibility than others. It may prove difficult determining precisely how much more or less responsible some states are than others. Nonetheless, Pogge's account should be revised to recognize more clearly the inequality of contribution that relevant states have towards collective responsibility for severe poverty.

Does collective responsibility mean responsibility is equally shared?

Thomas Pogge's contributions to our thinking about global justice are widely influential and among the most prominent in the field (see Jaggar, 2010). This article focuses on an important, but rarely discussed, part of his wider argument that states which are responsible for severe poverty collectively share this responsibility. I will argue Pogge's argument is not compelling and that relevant states may not have roughly equal responsibility for their shared contributions.¹ While they may share collective responsibility for severe poverty, but some states possess more responsibility than others. It may prove difficult determining precisely how much more or less responsible some states are than others. Nonetheless, Pogge's account should be revised to recognize the inequality of contribution that relevant states have towards collective responsibility for severe poverty.

My discussion begins by examining Pogge's case for collective responsibility. This is followed by presenting his case for equally shared collective responsibility. The next section provides a critique of Pogge's account before considering two possible objections to my critique.

The case for collective responsibility

Pogge highlights the pressing problem of severe poverty:

Some 2,800 million or 46 percent of humankind live below the World Bank's \$2/day poverty line ... On average, the people living below this fall 44.4 percent below it ... Each year, some 18 million of them die prematurely from poverty-related causes. This is one-third of all human deaths – 50,000 every day, including 34,000 children under five (Pogge, 2002, p. 2; see also Pogge, 2011).

Ordinary deaths from starvation and preventable diseases amount to approximately 250 million people and most of these are children (Pogge, 2002). Pogge (1986, p. 70) argues that 'secures access ... to minimally adequate shares of all basic good' satisfy 'basic justice' and is 'fully just'. Furthermore, he argues that we should judge our institutions on how well they protect our basic needs and human rights.

This 'institutional approach' to global justice is meant to serve a particular function. Pogge (2002, p. 52) says: 'We are asked to be concerned about avoidably unfulfilled human rights not simply insofar as they exist at all, but only insofar as they are produced by coercive social institutions in whose imposition we are involved'. The institutional approach to addressing the problem of severe poverty is to help us understand whether or not severe poverty exists as the result of some coercive international structure maintained by global institutions, such as the state. If the answer is affirmative, the institutional approach will demand that we address how global institutions may be changed to end their harmful effects.

Pogge offers a powerful argument in support of the view that the global institutional order maintains large-scale severe poverty (Pogge, 2002; Pogge, 2011). He provides several illuminating illustrations. The first consists of international economic bodies, such as the World Trade Organization, which he claims has enabled the exacerbation of deaths from

global poverty through monetary agreements that favour affluent states at the expense of others (Pogge, 2002). The second example consists of protectionist exemptions insisted upon by affluent states which have had ‘a huge impact on employment, incomes, economic growth, and tax revenues in the developing world where they live on the brink of starvation’ (Pogge, 2002, p. 18). Affluent states have ‘rigged’ international trade for their benefit against the interests of poor countries (Pogge, 2011). A third example consists of ‘the international resource privilege’ whereby Third World dictators sell large swathes of national resources and incur foreboding debts, enriching themselves at the great expense of the welfare of their people (Pogge, 2011, p. 29). Potential coup leaders vie for control through civil unrest in order to take advantage of this privilege. If we rejected the international resource privilege, then we would deny a major incentive for political instability that contributes to severe poverty (Pogge, 2002, 2004, 2005a; 2005b). These illustrations are used to demonstrate that there is an international global order contributing to the perpetuation of severe poverty. For Pogge, severe poverty is a human rights violation that must be addressed urgently (Pogge, 2011).

Pogge argues that states responsible for severe poverty share a collective responsibility for this severe poverty (Pogge, 2002). This is a key point. It arises from the facts that this harm is known given the poverty statistics available, it is foreseeable given the clear pattern of states (often, but not exclusively, affluent states) maintaining their unequal political and economic power at the expense of others, and it is avoidable because we can conceive of a feasible alternative global institutional order. Pogge argues:

When these facts obtain, so I claim, then the better-off – we – are harming the worst-off insofar as we are upholding a shared institutional order that is unjust by foreseeably and avoidably (re)producing radical inequality (Pogge, 2005a).

Severe poverty is then not an instance of mere bad luck: it is knowingly, foreseeably, and avoidably maintained by affluent states. Pogge continues:

We, the affluent countries and their citizens, continue to impose a global economic order under which millions avoidably die each year from poverty-related causes ... We must regard our imposition of the present global order as a grave injustice (Pogge, 2002, p. 109).

Relevant states have a collective responsibility for severe poverty. The problem now is to determine how this responsibility is to be shared by affluent states.

Pogge's case for shared responsibility

Pogge argues that relevant states share collective responsibility for severe poverty. He argues this point through a specific analogy that will be the focus of my critique. Pogge says:

Consider two factories releasing effluent into one river. Each factory's chemicals, by themselves, are harmless to the downstream population. But mixed together they are highly toxic and kill many. Given symmetrical placement of the fully informed factory owners, we must either hold both of them responsible or neither. It would be evidently absurd to content that neither is harming the downstream population and that both may thus continue their releases (Pogge, 2005b,; see also Pogge, 2005a).

For Pogge, both factories share collective responsibility for harming the downstream

population. This is true despite the fact that neither would possess any responsibility if one factory acts alone – and neither act collectively to cause harm downstream. He argues that each factory owner is ‘responsible for most of the harm they jointly produce’ (Pogge, 2005a, p. 48). It would be unfair to hold only one factory to account for the harm caused downstream because it only became possible through collective action. Note that both factories may share collective responsibility in this case even if neither knew about the existence of the other. The major factor is the existence of a harm that their collective activities have given rise to.

Crucially, Pogge claims further that both factories generally equally share collective responsibility for harming the downstream population. This is because their collective activities contribute to a harm. We cannot hold one, but not the other, responsible in his view. While Pogge does not demand strictly equal shares of responsibility, he does clearly state each is responsible ‘for most’ of what is jointly, if unknowingly, produced whether or not one factor produces far more chemicals than the other (Pogge, 2005a).

The question here is: why claim each factory has a roughly equal share of collective responsibility no matter the size of their individual contribution?

Pogge's central argument is that we cannot determine differences in shares of collective responsibility with satisfactory precision. He says: ‘To be sure, it is next to impossible to quantify the compensation efforts we owe for contributing to and (especially) profiting from the injustice of the global institutional order’ (Pogge, 2005b, p. 74). We are unable to make any such determinations, in fact, ‘even with all the care and information in the world’ (Pogge, 2005b, p. 80). So even if it appeared some states did, in fact, make a greater contribution, we cannot provide any satisfactory determination of how much greater any such contribution might be. Therefore, relevant states share collective responsibility for severe poverty broadly equally provided each has at least some responsibility and irrespectively of whether some possess perceptively more responsibility than others because satisfactory precision in determining differences in shares is too insecure and uncertain.²

A critique

Pogge's argument that relevant states equally share collective responsibility for severe poverty suffers from several problems. And they are problems even if concede much of Pogge's argument and we accept his background claim that relevant states have collective responsibility for severe poverty. The issue here is about whether relevant states share roughly equal collective responsibility and not whether they share any collective responsibility.

Consider Pogge's factories example. Let us accept they share causal responsibility for harm to persons living downstream.³ The example claims that no harm would be posed if only one had acted alone. It is because the two factories act together that any harm is created. This example is meant to be illustrative of the global sphere. By analogy, relevant states equally share collective responsibility for the harm of poverty because this harm is created

through their collective activities – whether or not this is done intentionally.

This analogy does not work. It is untrue that all cases of severe poverty are the result of relevant states acting through the global institutional order (Miller, 2007). For example, some cases are the result of natural disasters, such as the tsunami of 2004. Severe poverty is not like the harm created by the polluting factories: it is a harm where affluent states have some, but not all, responsibility for creating it. In Pogge's analogy, the factories only created harm to those living downstream through their collective activities.

Not every case of severe poverty has been created by the collective activities of relevant states. Nor every instance of poverty is created through the global institutional order. This undermines Pogge's central argument. If contributing to a global institutional order that creates poverty generates a shared collective responsibility to end it, this shared responsibility extends only to its shared by-product: namely, the poverty this order has made possible. This shared responsibility does not necessarily extend to poverty not created by the global institutional order, such as by natural disasters. Pogge's analogy reduces all poverty to having a common cause in the form of the global institutional order.⁴ Since not all poverty shares this cause, not all states – affluent or otherwise – share the collective responsibility for alleviating it that he claims. It would be analogous to a situation where no factory is polluting a river whose water made those living downstream unwell. There may be positive duties to act and in demanding ways, but not only because of a roughly equal collective responsibility based on negative duties that Pogge defends.

This fact illustrates how Pogge's argument by analogy – and his emphasis on the role of negative, not positive, duties to ground global justice – has limitations.⁵ We could argue that states should bear full collective responsibility for reducing the impact of climate change even though not all climate change is the result of human activities. Likewise, severe poverty may be generated from many sources. Nonetheless, the collective activities of affluent states are a significant factor and sufficient to hold these states collectively responsible. Such an argument does not support our holding affluent states roughly equally responsible for their collective activities either.

Some illustrations might help sharpen this criticism of Pogge's view:

Consider there is an amount of effluent that every factory can safely empty into a river without causing any harms to humans or wildlife downstream. Two factories A and B both emit effluent above this threshold, but humans and wildlife downstream are unharmed.

Each factory has individual responsibility for a wrong, but not for harmful consequences. If additional factories also emitted effluent above this safe threshold, then these two factories could potentially share in a collective responsibility for harming humans and wildlife downstream if such harm was manifested. The fact that others do not and such harm is avoided is perhaps a matter of moral luck. Each factory is engaged in wrongful behaviours that may require corrective action, but not of the global institutional kind that Pogge defends.

Examine a different scenario:

Consider there is an amount of effluent that every factory can safely empty into a river without

Collective Responsibility for Severe Poverty

causing any harms to humans or wildlife downstream. Two factories A and B both emit effluent so high above this threshold that humans and wildlife downstream are harmed.

Each factory continues to emit effluent above the safe threshold. But the difference with new scenario is that this is at a level so high that those downstream are now harmed. This collective responsibility is shared and might be divided roughly equally between them as each is above the safe threshold for avoiding harm to others. This scenario connects directly with Pogge's analogy, but we can introduce a further difference:

Consider there is an amount of effluent that every factory can safely empty into a river without causing any harms to humans or wildlife downstream. The first factory A safely emits below this threshold and the second factory B dangerously emits ten times the threshold. Humans and wildlife downstream are harmed.

Both factories emit effluent contributing to an overall amount above a safe threshold. The shared volume of effluent harms others downstream. Pogge claims that any contribution to the overall problem is necessary and sufficient for justifying our holding each factory to have a roughly equally share of the responsibility for addressing the harms caused. This is not merely a matter of thresholds.⁶ For Pogge, the states that act responsibly – like factory A – and safely must share the burdens for harms caused due to the more dangerous emittance of states acting like factory B. Pogge claims it does not matter if our individual contribution is within safe limits, but rather the full set of contributions taken as a whole are unsafe. If the collective causes harm downstream, then all factories bear responsibility no matter their contribution, if any.

Perhaps all of us would have duties to help or rescue those harmed regardless of their individual contributions. The main concern is that Pogge's argument is based on the view of our having negative duties based on our having a responsibility for the suffering of others. This presupposes there is a moral link between an individual's responsibility for actions taken and the harms endured by others. But this link needs to be established rather than assumed. And it matters that those who contribute most to giving rise to negative duties have the highest responsibility for addressing the harms created.

The context matters also. If two factories produce roughly equal emissions today that breach a tipping point only because one of these factories has been polluting for many decades, these roughly equal emissions of each factory today does not mean that they both share the same collective responsibility for the resulting harms. The factory that has contributed substantially more to the problem has a stronger and different negative duty to rectify this situation. Such a scenario mirrors the current climate change crisis where emissions of the past continue to impact on our present with some states contributing far more over time than others (Brooks, 2020). Likewise, the global institutional order is itself a historical constructive privileging a neoliberal perspective without acknowledging its cultural and neo-colonial roots.⁷ There is no level playing field of equals.

Pogge's analogy assumes that neither factory could threaten a harm to those living downstream without acting together. Harm becomes possible through collective action alone. Pogge must be able to argue that no relevant state is able to contribute to severe poverty without the collective activities of all other relevant states. If one or some relevant

states were able to contribute to severe poverty without further contributions from others, then the global institutional order serving as Pogge's main focus works very differently from how the factories analogy is meant to illustrate how this order relates to severe poverty. If one or some relevant states could create the harm of severe poverty on their own, then the situation is unlike two polluting factories that require each other to create a harm they have collective responsibility for.

Furthermore, if one or some relevant states could create the harm of severe poverty on their own, then it is also clear that some states would have far greater shares of responsibility for the collective harm of severe poverty. One or some relevant states need not require the contributions by others for this harm. But how much more responsible are the contributions of some relevant states than others? Pogge may be correct that it is easier to determine which relevant states share collective responsibility than to determine the differences in size of any individual share. But this is an unsatisfactory reason against making any such determination when one is far more blameworthy than others – recognizing that Pogge does not argue for strictly equal collective responsibility among states either.

For example, most relevant states recognize that accomplices are less liable than the offenders they aid or abet. Both a murderer and his accomplice may receive severe punishments, but the former will normally be punished no less severely than the latter.⁸ This distinction may be difficult to apply in some cases and in select instances both may be held similarly liable, but this is not true in most cases. The argument that relevant states equally share collective responsibility denies the fact that some may possess much greater shares than others and that the harm of severe poverty might continue because of the activities of one or some affluent states. If severe poverty were possible through the collective activities of some rather than all, then it is not a product of the joint enterprise of all relevant states. In other words, some relevant states may act as ‘accomplices’ but not ‘primary offenders’ and their differences in contribution should be recognized. Like a factory producing many times a safe limit of emissions versus another polluting below a threshold in the examples above.

Not all relevant states may share roughly equal responsibility for severe poverty. Pogge's example of polluting factories is an inapplicable analogy because it falsely assumes the fact that severe poverty is only a product of the collective activities of all relevant states rather than possible through the contributions of one or some – or even none.⁹ Moreover, determining differences in shares may be difficult, but this is not a compelling argument against recognizing any differences of contribution at all. The application of theory to practice will always be subjected to some degree of imprecision. Pogge must demonstrate that any differences lie within sufficiently close proximity that would make determinations of different shares a relatively pointless exercise. He must also revise his account of collective responsibility away from understanding severe poverty as a product of joint enterprise towards a recognition that some affluent states may contribute much more than others unless he can provide convincing evidence to the contrary.

Possible objections

There are three possible objections that should be considered that reject the critique developed here. The first objection concerns the account of collective responsibility offered. This objection is best presented through a new analogy. Consider the case where six people push someone's car off the top of a cliff. It might be argued that they are collectively responsible for destroying the car and each cannot escape responsibility by claiming that his or her contribution was not essential. Otherwise, all might claim their individual contributions were nonessential and escape accountability for participating in this collective act. What is at issue is the fact each pushed the car together: the vehicle did not move itself. If not for all acting in concert, the car might not have been destroyed.

The analogy can be applied in the context of global justice. If all relevant states do in fact behave in ways that sustain severe poverty, then they each share some part of the responsibility for the continuing existence of severe poverty. The objection is that Pogge's analogy of the two factories is contrary to what I have argued.

There are at least two problems with this objection. The first is I would not argue that any of the persons involved in pushing the car should avoid all responsibility for their collective act. Nor would I argue similarly about affluent states and their responsibilities for the existence of severe poverty. My point is only that some may hold greater responsibilities for collective activities than others. So what I deny is the all-or-nothing view of collective responsibility: that any connection to a collective enterprise warrants roughly equal treatment among all persons or states connected. While all may share some part of the collective responsibility for some wrong, shares may be unequal and this inequality should be recognised much more than Pogge seems willing to allow. We might call this 'common-but-differentiated responsibility' in contrast to Pogge's shared common responsibility view. So the problem with this first objection is it gets wrong my central claim defended in this piece.

The second problem is it provides an incorrect view about how responsibility is considered in law. This is noted above with the example of murderers and their accomplices: while both may receive severe punishments, the former normally receive more serious sentences than the latter. While both may share some part of their collective responsibility for a crime, the law does not treat them as requiring the same penal outcomes. Instead, the different degrees of culpability are considered in sentencing among other factors which may lead to different sentences tailored to individual cases. Similarly, my argument is that we think similarly with global justice and accept that affluent states may possess very different shares of wrongs they share collective responsibility for.

It might be argued further that my position is problematic because it requires us to determine precisely how responsibilities should be distributed. However, this is unnecessary because we must first acknowledge that states can possess different shares of collective wrongs – and not unlike what we find in sentencing law and policy.¹⁰ This is the aim of this article. If this is correct, then it is a separate issue about how the division of responsibilities should be distributed. While this may be controversial, there is already

important work grappling with this issue that I will not consider here.¹¹ Nonetheless, this would be an important focus for future work building off of my critique of Pogge's account.

A further possible objection to my position accepts that Pogge's analogy is problematic, but claims my position misses the wider point of his general argument while exposing a flaw in its presentation. For example, Pogge wants to argue that all of us in relevant states are responsible for global poverty in the sense that we all benefit from the unjust global order maintaining severe poverty, these benefits that rests on an imperial history and an exploitative set of current international institutions. It is in this sense that we are all equally responsible because we are all part of this world and all benefit from it. While this may or may not be a compelling argument, the challenge to my account is that 'equality' for Pogge – in terms of equality of responsibility – is not something that can be cast as a matter of degree. It is instead closer to the proposition that we are all equally human.

I do not disagree that Pogge understands responsibility in this way. He does claim our collective responsibility is shared roughly equally. This is precisely his point in the two factories case: each shares roughly equal responsibility for collective actions. The problem is that Pogge would deny there could be very unequal shares of responsibility for collective wrongs – this is what I deny. So the second possible objection merely restates Pogge's position and retains its central flaw in denying that some affluent states can possess greater shares of responsibility for severe poverty than others merely because some might provide any contribution.

Finally, another possible objection is that my critique is flawed logically. Like a run on a bank, no relevant individual may want the bank to fold but their concerted efforts – collectively – make this outcome possible. In that way, each has a 'collective' responsibility they would not have if acting differently. Similarly, different factories may have no intention to pollute a stream. They may not work together or have knowledge that their combined efforts 'collectively' contribute to creating a toxic environment downstream. Nonetheless, we can speak of the 'collective responsibility' of individuals and of factories for contributing to some end – and Pogge is likewise correct to say the same in his analogy.

In reply, let us accept for the sake of argument that Pogge's understanding of having a collective responsibility is looser than how this is understood in other contexts. To have a collective responsibility is only to say that an individual or state has a negative duty to address some harm made possible through some collective activity with others, however, unintentionally or uncoordinated. This would mean there are no accomplices as such because there is no intentionally collective activity.

Pogge's analogy remains unpersuasive. It is no clearer that uncoordinated activities leading collectively to some harm – like poisoning a stream – possess roughly equal shares of responsibility than if these activities were premeditated and organized. We might intuitively find uncoordinated activities leading to collective harms as having no more, and possibly less, negative duties than coordinated, intentional collective activities depending on our understanding of desert and its relevance.¹² Different states may intentionally or unintentionally contribute to some consequence, but it is unclear this distinction –

between intention and unintentional activities – is irrelevant and that all states have equal shares of collective responsibility even where not part of an intended joint enterprise. Indeed, the response to this possible objection highlights how question begging and not compelling Pogge's analogy is.

While there are three possible objections we may consider, they do not successfully challenge my position. The first claims that Pogge's account is correct using a new analogy of six people destroying a car. This objection fails because it incorrectly claims I would deny that individuals providing any contribution should avoid all responsibility. But this is not my view. What I deny is that shares of collective responsibility must always be all-or-nothing rather than divided and very unequally in some cases. The second possible objection accepts Pogge's analogy of the factories is problematic, but then proceeds to restate the same position. The problem with this view is that fails to acknowledge we can possess different shares of responsibility for collective actions.¹³ A third objection is my critique rests on a logical fallacy: in contributing to a consequence made possible through actions taken together, each state can be said to have some 'collective responsibility' for this consequence even if unintended or uncoordinated. In reply, it is unclear why intentional or unintentional consequences lacks any relevance and that either way each state should be held to have a roughly equal share of collective responsibility.

Conclusion

This article has focused on Thomas Pogge's famous argument that relevant states sharing roughly equal collective responsibility for severe poverty. My purpose is not to have the last word on this richly complex topic, but draw attention to a central flaw at the heart of his account.

The problem is this: even if we accept Pogge's background argument that relevant states share collective responsibility for severe poverty, we should reject the view that these states share roughly equal collective responsibility – in fact, this can vary considerably. This central flaw is argued for through an inapplicable analogy that assumes a view of joint enterprise that is not explicitly defended and probably false. If severe poverty is possible without the collective activities of all relevant states, then they may still possess a responsibility to end severe poverty but, first, the global situation is very different from Pogge's example of polluting factories and, second, there is no compelling argument in his account for holding each roughly equally responsible for the severe poverty created.

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Notes

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1. I refer throughout to 'relevant states' to capture both affluent states and other non-affluent states that Pogge claims contribute to a collective responsibility – and negative duty – to address and end severe

poverty.

2. It should be emphasised that Pogge's argument is not that both must be seen having strictly equal.
3. This claim has attracted important criticisms (see Ashford 2006:226–227). My argument is not about whether factories or states can possess collective responsibility, but rather that, even if this is accepted, this does not also prove that they must equally share collective responsibility. Most discussion has focused on the former and overlooked the latter.
4. My thanks to Eva-Maria Nag for highlighting this point.
5. My thanks to Eva-Maria Nag for highlighting this point.
6. I am grateful for an anonymous referee for helping develop this argument.
7. My thanks to Eva-Maria Nag for this analogy.
8. One example is the law of England and Wales which considers accomplices separately from main offenders. This includes distributing reduced sentences to accomplices as accomplices in relation to main offenders, including for murder cases (see Banks 2013:69–71 ('Assisting Offenders/Encouraging Offences')).
9. I have also noted that the example is a poor analogy because it falsely assumes that the harm of severe poverty is possible only because of the efforts of affluent states. This is not a reason to reject arguments about collective responsible, however, as I argued above.
10. It should be noted that Pogge's analogy builds uses the activities of actors on an individual level to make an argument on the global level. My claim is that on an individual level his account of how accomplices and others contribute collectively to a wrong does not work.
11. For example, consider David Miller's connection theory of remedial responsibilities in Miller (2007) and, for some criticisms, see Brooks (2014).
12. See 'Retribution' in Brooks (2012).
13. My purpose is critical in highlighting a previously unacknowledged problem in Pogge's account of global justice. It is beyond the scope of this article to survey alternative accounts of collective responsibility to provide a positive account of how else this problem should be understood.

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