

Freedom from Poverty as a Human Right: Who Owes What to the Very Poor?

Thomas Pogge, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 424 pp.,
\$125 cloth, \$35 paper.

Freedom from Poverty as a Human Right is a very impressive volume. All the contributors share the view that freedom from poverty is a basic human right, but they differ in how best to argue in its support. In general, there are two ways: One is to ground the right in a negative right of noninterference. On this view, poverty is the result of interference with the poor, and the cessation of that interference would put an end to poverty. Thomas Pogge adopts just such a view in the first essay of the volume. The other way is to ground the right in a positive right; that is, a right to receive from others the basic resources that one needs for a decent human life. Tom Campbell defends this view, while other contributors, such as Elizabeth Ashford, find both approaches to be equally useful.

One clear advantage to the positive rights approach is that it does not need to

specify wrongdoers—those whose interference causes the poor to be poor. Rather, all we need to know is who can provide for the needs of the poor. A clear disadvantage with this approach, however, is that it fails argumentatively with those who take negative rights to be fundamental and who derive all other rights from those fundamental negative rights. Thus, unless we have a non-question-begging argument that there are fundamental positive rights, it does make sense to explore whether we can derive a right to freedom from poverty from a negative rights approach. If that can be done, no one could rationally avoid endorsing a right to freedom from poverty unless, of course, the person were to give up on morality altogether. (And maybe not even then. See my *The Triumph of Practice over Theory in*

Ethics [New York: Oxford University Press, 2005], chap. 2.) Hence, the contributors to this volume who pursue a negative rights approach have, at least, an argumentative advantage.

However, most of the contributors do not seem interested in pursuing either approach to its full limit. Those pursuing the negative rights approach seem particularly concerned to empirically demonstrate that social institutions, particularly global ones, have the effect of depriving the poor of the resources they need for a decent life. Pogge, for example, frequently compares current practices to the historical examples of Stalin's disastrous economic plan of 1930–33 and the age-old practice of slavery to make his empirical case. But why is it not enough just to point out that the rich are interfering with the poor by keeping them from using the surplus resources that the rich possess? The poor clearly are coercively restricted from using the surplus of the rich to meet their own basic needs; and if the poor have no other way to meet those needs, why are these obvious social facts not enough to show that the rich are harming the poor by interfering with them? Suggesting that some complicated empirical argument is needed here, when in fact none is required, may weaken the strong case that exists for a right to freedom from poverty based on a negative right of noninterference.

More important, none of the contributors to this volume, as far as I can tell, reflect upon what consequences their defenses of human rights, more fully carried out, would have for future generations. In fact, a number of the contributors seem pleased to be able to point out that their proposals for guaranteeing a right to freedom from poverty would not really cost very much. But how would this be the case

if the basic needs of future generations were also taken into account?

In the United States currently more than a million acres of arable land are lost from cultivation each year due to urbanization, multiplying transport networks, and industrial expansion. In addition, another two million acres of farmland are lost each year due to erosion, salinization, and waterlogging. According to one estimate, only 0.6 of an acre of arable land per person will be available in the United States in 2050, whereas more than 1.2 acres per person are needed to provide a diverse diet (currently 1.6 acres of arable land are available). Similar or even more threatening estimates have been made for other regions of the world. How then are we going to preserve farmland and other food-related natural resources so that future generations are not deprived of what they require to meet their basic needs?

What about other resources? It has been estimated that a North American currently uses seventy-five times more resources than a resident of India. This means that in terms of resource consumption the North American continent's population is the equivalent of 22.5 billion Indians. Unless we assume that basic resources, such as arable land, iron, coal, and oil, are in unlimited supply, this unequal consumption will have to be radically altered if the basic needs of future generations are to be met. I would think that recognizing a right to freedom from poverty applicable both to existing and future people requires us to use up no more resources than are necessary for meeting our own basic needs here and now, securing for ourselves a decent life but no more. To use up more resources than this, it would seem, would be to deprive at least some future generations of the resources they would require to meet their

own basic needs. Obviously, this would impose a significant sacrifice on existing generations, particularly those in the developed world—clearly a far greater sacrifice than what the contributors to *Freedom from Poverty as a Human Right* have estimated is required for meeting the basic needs of existing generations. Nevertheless, these demands do appear to follow from both the negative and positive rights approaches to defending basic human rights that the contributors endorse.

There are many excellent arguments and strategies in this volume for securing a right to freedom from poverty at relatively little cost for those who presently exist. My main caveat is that its contributors have failed to note that once those arguments and strategies are extended to include future generations, it becomes very costly indeed to meet the basic requirements of morality.

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