Interview - Thomas Pogge

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Thomas Pogge is a leading political philosopher. He is the Director of the Global Justice Program and Leitner Professor of Philosophy and International Affairs at Yale University, and holds research appointments at a number of university research centers. His book *World Poverty and Human Rights* is one of the most prominent and controversial books in contemporary political philosophy, and argues that the people of affluent, Western countries are imposing a grievously unjust global institutional order on the world's poor. Pogge has also published widely on moral and political philosophy, including work on Rawls and Kant. He has founded and works with a number of projects to promote his ideas for alleviating global poverty, including Giving What We Can, Incentives for Global Health, and Academics Stand Against Poverty. He received his PhD in Philosophy from Harvard University and his dissertation was supervised by John Rawls.

Thomas Pogge answers your questions about global poverty, achieving a just global redistribution of income, John Rawls' legacy, and his book *World Poverty and Human Rights*.

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Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in contemporary international relations?

There is a lot of exciting work going on. What I find most interesting is work on the emerging global regulatory infrastructure — the supranational institutional order — both on the forces shaping its evolution as well as on its content, stability and effects. These rapidly evolving institutional arrangements will profoundly structure and shape the human world for centuries to come, and the outcomes of negotiations and contestations in these early years over the formulation of these arrangements may therefore be of enormous historical significance. It is thus regrettable that so little serious and systematic historical and normative thinking goes into the formulation of these arrangements, that they are largely shaped by highly partisan and short-term-oriented lobbying efforts bent on quick rewards from regulatory capture — a phenomenon that also obstructs the coherence and stability of the emerging supranational order, as witnessed for instance by the great North Atlantic financial crisis. Here thoughtful and well-informed academics could make a real difference, at least insofar as the media, politicians and the general public can be brought to take an interest in their analyses and reform ideas.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I am not confident I understand the world well at all, and how I understand it has changed in many ways. Perhaps the following is worth mentioning. I used to be much more confident about the prospects of finding allies in the struggle to end injustices inflicted upon the world's poor, including future generations. This has changed as I have found myself again and again surprised by the lack of vision and intelligence of so many politicians, by the lack of courage and independence of so many journalists and by the venality of so many academics. Despite remarkable exceptions, which appear all the more magnificent by contrast, the great majority in these three crucial professions are protective of entrenched privileges and thus huge obstacles to moral progress which, as a consequence, is much harder to achieve than I had once thought. On the plus side, it is inspiring to see how the concern for global justice has truly

taken off and is now prominently displayed in the work and publications of many non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in some international organizations and among young people especially those in the developing countries. The great challenge is to mobilize such widespread concern into focused political action that can gradually transform policies and institutional arrangements — chiefly supranational institutional arrangements — to make them less hostile to the striving of the world's poor people for dignity and a worthwhile life.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Work on something interesting and important; and always try to pin your work down to the real world by asking yourself what your theoretical account might predict or what concrete policies or reforms it might support.

Is the failure to achieve globalized empathy primarily a scandal of the human mind or heart? What do you think it takes to move people beyond an intellectual understanding of global poverty, to an emotional understanding that enables them to put empathy into action?

It is worth questioning the presupposition of this question: that we need empathy as the crucial link between an intellectual understanding of injustice and the ability to take action on behalf of justice. To be sure, to realize that there is something morally wrong with the status quo, and to take action to reform existing arrangements, we need to understand that people are suffering, that they feel hungry, insecure, desperate or violated in their dignity. But does this understanding need to be an emotional one, must we feel, so-to-speak, echoes of such people's suffering within ourselves? Or is it possible to act morally from a merely intellectual understanding, without such emotions, as Kant suggests in the *Groundwork* with his example of the deeply depressed man who, having lost all sympathy for the suffering of others, nonetheless tears himself out of his indifference to help them? I raise this question because my own work seeks to address the intellectual understanding of my readers. I try to show them how we are involved in inflicting immense harms upon defenseless poor people in distant poor countries, and I hope of course that their appreciation of their own involvement will move them to action. But I don't know and I don't really care whether this aimed-for move to action is or is not mediated by some emotional experience — though I am convinced that the intellectual appreciation *can* lead to action without the mediation of any such experience. The point is important because emotional empathy can easily be a force for evil, as illustrated by various nationalist and ideological movements in the 20th century (fascism, the Cultural Revolution, etc.). Empathy for supposed victims of supposed wrongs or insults can easily move people to commit horrendous atrocities. And so we should not merely try to mobilize people's empathy for the right causes (and divert it from the wrong causes) but also, and perhaps primarily, promote intellectual understanding: that is, get people to think seriously and comprehensively about questions of justice and ensure that their empathy is coupled with and guided by such reflection.

Of all the ideas for realizing (partially) your redistributive goals (the Global Resources Dividend, a Tobin Tax, a Health Impact Fund, Academics Stand Against Poverty) which do you believe has the most significant potential to have an impact and why?

Ideas have impact in all sorts of direct and indirect ways, and so it is very hard to tell, even with the benefit of considerable hindsight, how some idea affected the course of human history. Just ask yourself how the world would be different today if Immanuel Kant's "Perpetual Peace" had never seen the light of day or if, God forbid, Kant himself had died in his crib. I think no one really has any idea. If this is right, if we cannot know much about the impact of even very major ideas, persons or events even centuries after the fact, then your question is really too hard to answer. For my answer should really try to anticipate what the answer would be of a much better informed student of human history a few decades, or centuries, in the future. And if even such a person's answer would be highly speculative and unreliable, then the best-grounded answer I might give is hardly worth your readers' attention.

Now we might rephrase your question to ask which of these ideas I believe to have the best prospects of eventual implementation. Here I would point to a recent one, the idea of a global alternative minimum tax (GAMT) which would ensure that multinational corporations — no matter how cleverly they reshuffle their profits into low-tax jurisdictions — pay at least some minimum amount of taxes on their profits. The basic idea is to require multinational corporations (MNCs) to pay to a Human Development Fund (HDF) 90 percent of the amount by which all national taxes they pay

fall short of a minimum percentage of their worldwide profits. Thus, if this minimum percentage is set at 10 percent, and if the national taxes some MNC is paying on its profits add up to 7 percent, then this corporation would have to pay an additional 2.7 percent of its profits to the HDF. This proposal would not have gained much support before the recent financial crisis, but it may well be realistic in its aftermath when austerity focuses citizen attention on shrinking tax revenues from corporations and on all the many creative shenanigans that (especially multinational) corporations employ to avoid paying their fair share of the cost of government, particularly in the administratively weaker less developed countries.

By the way, as this example illustrates, the term *re-distribution* does not capture the essence of my proposals. I am not accepting the existing distribution of the social product, asking merely that this resulting distribution be corrected *ex post* to mitigate the worst inequities. Rather, I am challenging this distribution and the institutional mechanisms that produce it. Both nationally and globally, I argue for reforms in how the social product is distributed in the first place — and for corresponding reforms in the political procedures through which distributively important rules are designed and applied.

Is India's recent Supreme Court ruling not to patent Glivec, Novartis AG's cancer treatment that is chemically very similar to an earlier drug, a victory for health in the developing world, or, is it throwing down the gauntlet to pharmaceutical companies to find alternative means of protecting their products? What does this ruling mean to the future of health in the developing world?

Well, it's a victory for health insofar as patients in need of Glivec will now be able to afford it. But it will also lead pharmaceutical innovators to redouble their efforts to strengthen intellectual property protections in India and elsewhere. Moreover, insofar as these efforts fail, pharmaceutical firms can be expected to invest less in efforts to develop and improve medical treatments (and the beta crystalline form that Novartis developed of imatinib mesylate is an improvement for patients). So for me the ruling illustrates once more the need for a solution that promotes both: innovation and access, rather than merely one of these at the expense of the other. One such solution is, of course, the Health Impact Fund on which I — with Aidan Hollis and a good number of other collaborators — have been working for several years.

In order to move successfully from theory to practice, you have acknowledged the need to package arguments in ways that are appealing to the prevailing powers and their interests. Is there a risk that, in taking this step, you are reinforcing and entrenching underlying value-sets that inherently lock in massive poverty? How do you navigate this risk?

I aim for institutional reform proposals that can be formulated to appeal not merely to moral but also to prudential motivations. In many cases, such an appeal to self-interest is harmless. Let us consider an example. I believe that ordinary citizens in the more affluent countries have self-interested reasons to support establishment of the Health Impact Fund. One such reason is that HIF-registered medicines would be distributed with a strong emphasis on health impact. Under the present system, profits arise from the mere fact that a medicine is sold to a patient, and so the patient has little assurance that the medicine prescribed or recommended to her is really the most suitable for her rather than the one on which others earn the most profit. Under the HIF system, by contrast, the most profitable medicine is the most suitable: an innovator profits according to the health gains it achieves with its medicine. Pharmaceutical innovators would then pay much more attention, beyond sales, to the actual use of any products they choose to register for HIF rewards. Sales resulting in no therapeutic benefits are worthless to the innovator whose earnings depend on health gain to the patient. Innovators would therefore try hard to reach the patients who can benefit the most and try to ensure that patients are properly instructed in the optimal use of the drug and adhere to the proper regimen. Because such efforts to optimize a medicine's health impact would benefit all patients alike, affluent populations have reason to support establishment of the HIF. And there is, as far as I can see, absolutely nothing wrong with this: it is good for patients and also morally good that those who provide medical care to affluent populations should be motivated to act in the best interest of their patients.

More generally, I think it is alright to justify some conclusion to others by appealing to premises one does not share oneself. One should make clear that one is not endorsing these premises, especially when they are in conflict with

one's own values. Thus I have written a whole book (*World Poverty and Human Rights*) arguing that we citizens of the affluent countries have stringent and demanding (negative) duties to the world's poor even if there were no "positive" duties to protect and assist others. I don't think this book has entrenched the rejection of positive duties because I have made clear (at least to the more careful readers) that I do not myself share this rejection.

The global financial crisis has highlighted systemic problems that invite moral and institutional analysis and reform. How do you view the response to date of the public, academia and policy makers faced with this crisis? Are you optimistic that we will see substantive and/or systemic change?

Much of the response by the privileged has been protective of the woefully inadequate regulation and oversight of the financial institutions and protective also, and especially, of the inordinate influence that banks, hedge funds and billionaires wield on politics, especially US national and international policy. Nonetheless, there are some hopeful developments. A lot of anger among ordinary citizens, who are paying the bill for the massive bail-outs, has motivated politicians to attend to the huge amounts of potential tax revenues lost as a consequence of bank secrecy, tax havens and various forms of creative accounting. It is likely that opportunities for tax evasion and various kinds of tax abuse will be curtailed in the next few years. What is unclear is whether this will be a deal by and for the benefit of the more powerful states or whether the developing countries, whose revenue losses are proportionally much larger, will also be included. Here some political mobilization is needed to ensure that secrecy jurisdictions, such as Switzerland and Singapore, will be pressured into exchanging tax information not only with the large economies of the United States and the European Union but also with the smaller developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. What we need are not merely bilateral tax cooperation agreements wherever these are in the interest of both parties, but general support for the principle that countries should not attract capital into their banking system by facilitating tax cheating by foreigners. Similarly, we need a general agreement to ensure that the profits multinational corporations report in various countries are reasonably related to the size of their operations there rather than concentrated in tax havens where these corporations have only a token presence.

Your book *World Poverty and Human Rights* suggests that people in wealthy Western democracies are actively harming the world's poor by participating in international institutions that give resource and borrowing privileges to corrupt local elites. What, if anything, can individuals, both in the global North and South, do to help correct this global geo-political imbalance?

First and foremost, we can discourage our own government from supporting clearly illegitimate foreign governments. Ideally, our government should not recognize and enforce ownership rights in natural resources acquired from illegitimate rulers, who are in effect stealing these resources from the populations they oppress. Our government should not lend money to illegitimate rulers and should discourage banks from extending such loans by making clear that it will not assist these banks in getting such loans serviced by future governments of the borrowing country. Our government should not authorize arms sales to illegitimate rulers and should sign agreements with them only under special circumstances when doing so is clearly to the benefit of the country's inhabitants. And our government should seek alliances with other governments around the world that spread such commitments. We can reinforce this message to our government through our own private conduct, for example, by not buying gasoline from firms that buy crude oil from tyrants, by not using any bank that makes loans to tyrants, by not buying from companies that sell weapons to tyrants and by not investing in any such companies. As with earlier boycotts of firms doing business in Apartheid South Africa, such conduct may not have much of an immediate economic effect. But it will have a substantial political effect by putting our government on notice that voters are serious about getting it to scale back its collaboration with oppressive regimes.

Do you think John Rawls' legacy is best kept to his *Theory of Justice*, or should it include the more controversial *Law of Peoples*?

For better or worse, both works are, and will be remembered as, part of Rawls's legacy. I am on record arguing that both works fail. But I also agree with what your question suggests: that *A Theory of Justice* is a truly magnificent work while *The Law of Peoples* is a rather more ordinary one. The first book constructs a unified and compelling framework — centering around the focus on the basic structure and the priority concern for the least advantaged —

within which citizens' discourse about the institutional arrangements of their society was to have taken place. The framework is flawed because Rawls did not quite overcome the consequentialist bias of his early years and thus took the standpoint of prospective participants (as embodied in the original position) to be the only morally relevant standpoint. He thought of citizens only as persons affected by the rules rather than also as creators and imposers of these rules. And so he missed the moral relevance of the causal pathways through which rules have their effects; he missed the fact that, for instance, harms mandated by the rules we impose upon ourselves weigh more heavily in the scales of justice than otherwise similar harms our rules merely fail to prevent.

The second book evades the key question that Rawls's critics — much inspired by his first book — had asked him to address: how are we to assess supranational institutional arrangements from a moral point of view? It is undeniable (though Rawls makes some effort to deny it — LP 108) that such supranational arrangements have profound effects on human life prospects as well as on the internal organization and culture of especially the smaller and weaker national societies, and it is thus clear that this is an important question of justice. Rawls suggests that any supranational institutional arrangements are morally acceptable so long as peoples agree to them ("Peoples are to observe treaties and undertakings. .. Peoples are equal and are parties to the agreements that bind them" — LP 37) and the poorest societies are kept at some decent minimum through his duty of assistance. But he also concedes that any "unjustified distributive effects" of cooperative organizations need to be corrected (LP 43, 115). The word "unjustified" here suggests that he is not merely calling for (transactional) distributive correction, presumably pursuant to his duty of assistance, but for reforming supranational institutional arrangements so that they no longer produce those unjustified distributive effects in the first place. It suggests that we need after all what Rawls sought to dismiss as unnecessary: a conception of global justice for the moral assessment of supranational institutional arrangements. But then Rawls never addresses this need and thus leaves unanswered what is perhaps the most important moral question of our time. Nonetheless, it is deeply moving that, severely handicapped after several strokes, Rawls struggled to complete this book, laying out the grounds for his belief that, at the supranational level, only a duty of assistance is needed rather than a conception of justice for the moral assessment of supranational institutional arrangements. Though unconvinced by Rawls's reasoning, I am nonetheless deeply grateful that he set forth his case as clearly and comprehensively as he could.

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This interview was conducted by Adam Groves. Adam is the Founder of e-IR and a director of e-IR's editorial board.