

# POVERTY AND INEQUALITY: CHALLENGES FOR THE IAB: IAB PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper focuses on poverty and inequality in the world today. First, it points out how this topic is a main concern for the IAB. Second, it proposes 'new' theoretical tools in order to analyze global justice and our obligations towards the needy. I present John Rawls's denial that the egalitarian principle can be applied to the global sphere, his proposed weak duty of assistance, and his consideration of endemic poverty as essentially home-grown. In opposition, I focus on Thomas Pogge as representative of a cosmopolitan view who also holds a critical position towards the international systems which allow and cause poverty. I endorse the general normative proposal that defends every human being as an ultimate unit of moral concern, as well as the strategy of moving away from the charity model of bilateral aid to the realm of rights and duties. These ideas should redesign and broaden the normative and practical roles of institutions, and should also help provide a new approach on bioethical issues such as drug patenting or the imbalance in global research and neglected diseases.*

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## I. THE IDENTITY OF THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF BIOETHICS

In this Address I would like to point out to some of the concerns that I believe constitute part of the identity of this Association. I will also suggest some paths or conceptual tools to go beyond them.

Since its creation, the International Association of Bioethics has targeted such key issues as clinical ethics, research ethics, health policies, animal rights, and environmental ethics among

others. However, if we want to identify its main concerns, we should focus firstly on its international commitment to global bioethics – the topic of the Tokyo Congress – as well as on its fight against the lack of freedom of speech in bioethics; for example, through the London Declaration issued in 2000. Secondly, we should outline its deep concern for injustice, global inequalities, and the imbalance of power in the world.

I believe this second set of problems constitutes a central part of today's worries for the IAB. Power and injustice was a topic that warranted an entire conference, such as the Brazil conference, which yielded several papers for publication in *Bioethics*. Similar concerns regarding inequalities were presented in Dan Wikler's 1996 Presidential Address, when he strongly emphasized the social responsibilities of bioethicists regarding the lack of access to health care in the world.<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein was Ruth Macklin's Presidential Address at the 2000 Conference. There she presented data about inequalities in the world and the unjust situation of women. At that time she posed a question that is still relevant: 'When bioethicists of the future read the mainstream literature of our field from the last three decades of the 20th century, they may very well wonder about us: Why was only a very small percentage of the literature in our field devoted to the injustice in health status, access to health care and adequate nutrition, and morbidity and mortality of women over these decades . . . ?'.<sup>2</sup>

The theme of our present Congress also reflects these misgivings. One of the meanings of 'deep listening' is to make the effort to pay attention to persons who are frequently ignored. It indicates how important it is that justice – and global justice – includes marginalized groups and populations, indigenous groups, and others that past justice has left behind.

## II. POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

It is by now widely accepted that income poverty is a risk factor for premature mortality and increased morbidity.<sup>3</sup> Inequality and poverty are deeply intermingled in bioethics:

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Wikler. Presidential Address: Bioethics and Social Responsibility. *Bioethics* 1997; 11(3/4): 185–192.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Macklin. Bioethics and Public Policy in the Next Millennium: Presidential Address. *Bioethics* 2001; 15(5/6): 378.

<sup>3</sup> S.V. Subramanian & Ichiro Kawachi. Income Inequality and Health: What Have we Learned so Far? *Epidemiol Rev* 2004; 26: 78. Even if there are studies searching for new variables, see Nancy Ross. 2004. *What Have we Learned Studying Income Inequality and Population Health?* Canada. Canadian Institute for Health Information.

We know that one-third of all human deaths are due to poverty-related causes, such as starvation, diarrhea, pneumonia, tuberculosis, malaria, measles, and perinatal conditions; all of which could be prevented or cured cheaply through food, safe drinking water, vaccinations, rehydration packs or medicines.<sup>4</sup>

Hence, if we are to consider bioethical problems, this global context cannot be ignored. What we can see is that little by little, these issues are becoming increasingly more relevant.

The work done by our former president, Solly Benatar, for example, has exposed many of these inequalities. However, it is time to go beyond denouncing. In order to meet this difficult challenge we need, among other things, 'new' theoretical tools. This does not mean that the following is the only possible solution, but merely one that could be explored by bioethicists.

I think a valuable resource lies in some conceptual frameworks of political philosophy. This line of thought has been present in many theoretical developments since the beginning of bioethics. However, many theories in political philosophy have lately been developed in a parallel way. Let me introduce some proposals regarding global distributive justice and responsibilities to the poor from far away places, and pose some questions regarding how we should continue. The challenge lies in the level of abstraction of this conceptual framework. In this sense, part of the task for those of us working in bioethics may be to provide a practical view and to suggest some concrete developments. We can enrich and complement these new theoretical tools through specific and practical measures.

### III. BIOETHICS AND THE SEARCH FOR CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Although we can trace our obligations to the needy as far back as the stoics and Greek philosophy, let me begin with contemporary philosophy by recalling Peter Singer. This Australian philosopher, and the first president of the IAB, was one of the 'pioneers' regarding the conceptual analysis of poverty and our obligations to the distant poor. He incorporated philosophical discussion into this topic in 1972 with his now classic, but at the time revolutionary, 'Famine, Affluence and Morality'. There he considered the situation of the 'absolute poor' and the responsibilities of the 'absolute rich'. He questioned the traditional beneficent or

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Pogge. 2002. *World Poverty and Human Rights*. Cambridge. Polity Press: 98.

charity model by arguing in favor of a strong duty to help the absolute poor.

After decades of some – though too little – debate regarding this seminal article,<sup>5</sup> some questions and worries have finally emerged: What should we do once we acknowledge the extreme disparities between societies and persons? Should it be the concern of each country and its own mechanisms to fight inequality? In the year 2000 Macklin pointed out the impossibility of sub-Saharan countries solving their own health problems. She rightly said that ‘global inequalities go beyond health status and health care’ and expressed the view that ‘the problem could not be solved by *policies developed solely within nation states*’.<sup>6</sup> I agree. These are countries with a colonial past, ravaged by AIDS, by enormous national debts, lacking minimal infrastructure, and with less than US \$10 per person to invest in health care. Can the rest of the world simply stand by and watch? Should the model continue to be global distribution of wealth by appeal to charities? Should we believe in a global distributive justice where richer countries and richer populations have certain obligations towards deprived ones? If so, how can we justify such a claim?

In the 1970s John Rawls revolutionized ethics and political philosophy with his *Theory of Justice*. He defended liberal egalitarian principles of justice among fellow-members of a single society as the social contract that would result from hypothetical deliberations. He offered a brilliant justification of a fair redistribution. He defended the *egalitarian difference principle* – ‘maximizing the conditions of the least well off.’ This principle allows inequalities only if it will benefit the position of those least advantaged.

In 1999, with *The Law of Peoples*<sup>7</sup> his ideas attained the international arena. Rawls proposed hypothetical deliberations between representatives of sovereign peoples, not individuals. This resulted in far weaker requirements for international equality and relatively high barriers for international interventions. For Rawls, ‘endemic’ poverty is essentially homegrown:

<sup>5</sup> Other philosophers concerned at that time were: Barry, Beitz, Shue and O’Neill. Brian Barry. 1973. *The Liberal Theory of Justice*. Oxford. Clarendon Press; Charles Beitz. 1979. *Political Theory and International Relations*. Princeton. Princeton University Press; Henry Shue. 1980. *Basic Rights: Subsistence, Affluence and U.S Foreign Policy*. Princeton. Princeton University Press; Onora O’Neill. 1986. *Faces of Hunger*. London. Allen & Unwin.

<sup>6</sup> Ruth Macklin, *op. cit.* note 2, p. 373 (my emphasis).

<sup>7</sup> John Rawls. 1999. *The Law of Peoples*. Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press.

I believe that the causes of the wealth of a people and the forms it takes lie in their political culture and in the religious, philosophical, and moral traditions that support the basic structure of their political and social institutions, as well as in the industriousness and cooperative talents of its members, all supported by their political virtues. I would further conjecture that there is no society in the world – except for marginal cases – with resources so scarce that it could not, were it reasonably and rationally organized and governed, become well-ordered.<sup>8</sup>

Hence, for Rawls, local countries are solely responsible for their situation.

Rawls introduced a double standard by rejecting the application of the difference principle to the international arena; by endorsing only a weak duty of assistance, for example, in cases of emergency.<sup>9</sup> This is why critics argue that Rawls was inconsistent: his own premises should lead to radical conclusions about the need for the large-scale redistribution of wealth and resources to the world's worst-off people.<sup>10</sup> Charles Jones, for example, argued that Rawls defended a *status quo* position on international justice.<sup>11</sup>

Is Rawls justified in allowing a double standard – a criterion for local justice (including redistribution and consideration of the least well off) and quite a different one for global justice (with almost no redistribution)?

The duty of assistance seems too low a standard. It applies only to what Rawls called 'burdened societies', that is, societies burdened by unfavorable conditions.<sup>12</sup> Can we defend stronger criteria? What should they be? In contrast with nationalistic perspectives that endorse special obligations of distributive justice to fellow co-nationals,<sup>13</sup> cosmopolitan proposals argue that distributive justice principles should be applied to all human beings. This

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 108.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Jones. 2001. *Global Justice. Defending Cosmopolitanism*. Oxford. Oxford University Press: 2.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> For Rawls 'Well ordered peoples have a *duty* to assist burdened societies. It does not follow, however, that the only way, or best way, to carry out this duty of assistance is by following a principle of distributive justice to regulate economic and social inequalities among societies. Most such principles do not have a defined goal, aim or cut-off point, beyond which aid may cease.' Rawls, *op. cit.* note 7, p. 106.

<sup>13</sup> This is the case of Tamir or Miller. Yael Tamir. 1993. *Liberal Nationalism*. Princeton. Princeton University Press; David Miller. 1995. *On Nationality*. Oxford. Clarendon Press.

view holds that every human being has a global stature as an ultimate unit of moral concern.<sup>14</sup> However obvious this affirmation may seem, it is far from accepted in an increasingly individualistic and indifferent world. A basic step, then, is to acknowledge that the scope of justice is global.

Within cosmopolitan views there are different answers. There are appeals to a positive duty to protect persons from great harms and risks if one can do so at little cost, as Singer suggested.<sup>15</sup> One may also focus on *subjective goods and ills* (human happiness, preference satisfaction) or on more *objective* ones (human need fulfillment, capabilities or resources).<sup>16</sup> Proposals vary about what the adequate mechanisms should be. Thomas Pogge's writings are of interest in this respect. He endorses an institutional cosmopolitanist conception by postulating the fundamental principles of ethics formulated in terms of human rights.<sup>17</sup> In sharp contrast to Rawls's assumptions, he holds a critical position towards the international system which allows and causes poverty. For him there are at least three morally significant connections between rich countries and the global poor. First, their social starting positions and ours have emerged from a single historical process that was pervaded by massive grievous wrongs (genocide, colonialism, and slavery explaining both the poverty of some countries and the affluence of others). Second, we depend on a single natural resource base, from the benefits of which poor countries are largely, and without compensation, excluded. Third, we coexist within a single economic order that has a tendency to perpetuate and aggravate global economic inequalities.<sup>18</sup> The existing global trading regime contributes to the perpetuation of poverty through the imbalance in market openings that took place in the 1990s. These poor countries do not yet enjoy unfettered access to markets and are still hampered by anti-dumping duties, quotas, and very high subsidies. By upholding a global economic order that favors rich countries, the latter contributes to the persistence of the world poverty problem. Hence, Pogge says that *poverty* should be considered a *human rights violation* when it is in good part caused by others.<sup>19</sup> That is, severe poverty is a human rights

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Pogge. 2002. *World Poverty and Human Rights*. Cambridge. Polity Press: 169

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Pogge. 2001. *Global Justice*. Massachusetts. Blackwell Publishers: 14

<sup>16</sup> Pogge, *op. cit.* note 14, p. 169.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p. 176.

<sup>18</sup> Pogge, *op. cit.* note 15, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> Jeanette Blom. Thomas Pogge. Interview. *Social and Human Sciences UNESCO Newsletter* 2003; (Oct-Dec): 4–8, 5.

violation insofar as it is foreseeable and avoidably caused by the design of the global economic order (for which rich countries and their citizens bear primary responsibility) and also, of course, insofar as it is foreseeable and avoidably caused by national regimes and policies.<sup>20</sup>

Pogge designs economic ground rules that should regulate property, cooperation, and exchange,<sup>21</sup> for example, to suppress or modify borrowing privileges in order to tie the rights of rulers to sell resources and to borrow in the country's name to some minimal degree of democratic legitimacy, or through the implementation of a Global Resource Dividend, where a small part of the value of resources that are harvested worldwide would be diverted into a fund specifically for poverty eradication. He also proposes a vertical distribution of sovereignty: a multi-layered order.<sup>22</sup>

Besides Pogge's empirical proposals<sup>23</sup> there are other practical proposals that could be interesting to endorse and pursue, such as the Tobin Tax, which shares the same cosmopolitan spirit. In 1978, Nobel Prize winner James Tobin proposed taxing all the transactions on the currency markets<sup>24</sup> at a low rate in order to discourage speculation and provide the international community with resources to fight poverty.<sup>25</sup>

What I wish to outline with the introduction of these ideas is the reappearance of two fundamental points: the general normative proposal and defense of every human being as an ultimate unit of moral concern; and the strategy of moving away from the charity model of bilateral aid and philanthropy to the realms of rights and duties. I think they lead to a path worth pursuing, one that builds bases and constructs interesting arguments to end inequalities.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Pogge. Personal communication with the author, October 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Pogge, *op cit.* note 14, p. 176.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 178.

<sup>23</sup> Which are still being refined and worked by the author with multidisciplinary groups.

<sup>24</sup> Note that 84% of all foreign exchange transactions occur in just nine countries. Win-win for the world's poor. At <http://www.tobintax.org.uk/?lid=1443>.

<sup>25</sup> Tobin Tax Initiative. At <http://tobintaxcall.free.fr> Some of the projects envisioned are: poverty eradication, environmental restoration, conservation and preservation, disaster aid, disease prevention and humanitarian aid, and peacekeeping missions. See: <http://www.ceedweb.org/iirp/polprop.htm>. On 1 July 2004 Belgium was the first country to pass Currency Transaction Tax legislation.

## IV. FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

How should we continue? If one accepts global distributive justice, what political institutions should one accept?<sup>26</sup> A road to explore then, is whether we can redesign or broaden the normative and practical roles of institutions like the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and of international NGOs.

We can also approach certain bioethical issues differently. For example, we can consider the current international policies regarding drug patents. We could object to the obstacles to the exceptions already in place. We should strive to include other exceptions that take into consideration the devastation of certain countries like those that have been destroyed by AIDS. If we take a cosmopolitanist view seriously, we may have to redesign a just policy regarding the imposition of royalties – a policy that, while protecting intellectual property, will be more flexible and sensitive to situations of great need and will make it possible to increase the accessibility of vital and necessary drugs.

Another example in bioethics is that of international research goals and results. We should move away from the 10/90 gap: 'Only 10% of all medical research worldwide is devoted to medical problems that account for 90% of the global disease burden.'<sup>27</sup> How can we? What about a cosmopolitanist perspective? As I have already mentioned, there might be various possibilities: for example, through a redirection of the role of international funding agencies to cover the gap by charging the pharmaceutical industry a reasonable percentage, and thus help design other non-commercial research that may lessen the infamous gap.

Considering these issues from a global perspective could help avoid certain nationalisms, local corruptions, and overlapping efforts of poor countries with similar health problems. It may be fairer. Countries might not be excluded because of their lack of power or their inability to negotiate equitable conditions for their populations: Brazil's ability to negotiate with big pharmaceutical companies cannot be compared with Bolivia's. If the problems

<sup>26</sup> Simon Caney. International Distributive Justice. *Polit Stud* 2001; 49: 974–997, notes 56–57.

<sup>27</sup> Commission on Health Research for Development. 1990. *Health Research: Essential Link to Equity in Development*. Oxford. Oxford University Press; Ahmad Kabhir. Report Reveals Serious Imbalance in Global Research Funding. *Lancet* 2000; 355: 1704–06; Global Forum for Health Research. 2000. *The 10/90 Report on Health Research 2000*. Geneva. Global Forum for Health Research. At <http://mim.nih.gov/English/news/globalforum.html>.

are taken from a regional or global perspective, the results can be implemented globally in the countries that need them and not only in 'strong' resource-poor countries, such as Brazil or India.

These are just initial steps in the process of seriously exploring theoretical and practical answers to global inequalities and injustices. Perhaps it is now time, together with globalization, to truly defend a cosmopolitan point of view, a view which holds that the deliberately harmful actions and omissions of international agencies, who should presumably be narrowing the gap instead of widening it, are matters for which they should be held morally responsible. This is a position in which all individuals are perceived as equals and worthy, independently of the place and situation in which they were born, independently of their historical marginalization and their unheeded voices.

I believe that one of our roles as bioethicists is to help build this awareness, to reject the present model of insensitivity and indifference and adopt a new one based on responsibility, duties and justice. People with economic, political or intellectual resources from all over the world, and those from rich countries are not mere bystanders. They share some responsibility.

Some of these proposals may be criticized as utopian. However, I would like to recall a quotation from Max Weber regarding the passion and perspective involved in politics. Weber said: 'Certainly, all historical experience confirms the truth – that man would not have attained the possible unless once and again he had reached out for the impossible.'<sup>28</sup> On observing the unjust face of the world and the need to lessen pervasive gaps in the world's distribution of wealth, Weber's idea is now more relevant than ever.

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<sup>28</sup> Max Weber. 1946. *Essays in Biology* (Politik als Beruf). H.H. Gerth & Wright Mills, eds & trans. New York. Oxford University press: 128.