

Review of the book by Gottfried Schweiger and Gunter Graf,
A Philosophical Examination of Social Justice and Child Poverty.
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Poverty is one of the most embarrassing and pressing problems with which humanity is confronted. It usually leads those suffering it to distress, and in the extreme cases even to violence or death. Furthermore, it is also a constant source of expenses for the different states, and the situation, the problem, perpetuate through generations. Poor people also have children, and their offspring naturally share the living conditions of their parents which in general also determine their adulthood. Who is born poor, usually dies poor. This is especially tragic in poor and developing countries where starvation, homelessness and premature death is still a rough and painful constant. Poverty is so severe in these countries, it is so grave what is happening there, that it is quite common that a focus on severe, absolute poverty comes with neglect of interest in poverty in welfare states. That, as the authors of the book remark several times, would be a terrible mistake (pp. 162-163):

It is clear that in poorer countries child poverty is a much more severe and widespread problem than in welfare states, where most poor children reach a level of well-being and well-becoming that is higher than that of most children worldwide. Yet one should never use these differences in the severity of absolute poverty, so to speak, to underestimate or downplay the severity of relative poverty [...]. Child poverty in welfare states is an injustice that weighs heavily and demands coordinated action.

Developed countries with welfare systems are not states with a fully realized social justice, but they are the closest we know to it. It is therefore of vital importance to understand what is failing in them in order not only to improve the lives of the people living there (which certainly would already be enough), but also to provide developing countries with the necessary information to prevent them to make the same mistakes. Another risk of not taking seriously enough the challenge of poverty in developed countries walks hand in hand with the cost to maintain a welfare system. Poverty is expensive, and the resources of the state are limited, which may lead to cost-cutting measures meanly affecting the poor. The research on poverty in developed countries should lead to prevent this situation by following an alternative strategy, namely, diminishing poverty. The book of Schweiger and Graf take a step forward in this direction, while at the same time restricts its examination to one of the most vulnerable groups of the society: the children. In their book the authors justify the interest of a philosophical research on child poverty, introduce and adjust (when necessary) the theories, ideas as well as concepts that have influenced their analysis, and use them and the existing empirical work in the literature to clearly identify child poverty as unjust and to initiate the search for an adequate and necessary attribution of responsibilities and actions. Finally they turn their attention to the global issue of child poverty where they outline some interesting ideas taking as basis the well explained reasoning developed in the previous chapters.

In order to identify child poverty as unjust the first thing needed is a metric of justice (Chapter 1) as well as a metric of child poverty (Chapter 2). The authors will importantly opt here for the metric of justice provided by the capability approach, for the idea that a metric of justice should take into account a person's agency, and thus the multidimensional nature of her well-being. It is through the realization of certain activities and states (functionings), and through the possibility to access others (capabilities) that we reach comprehensive well-being. Justice then is a question of possessing certain functionings and capabilities (up to a certain threshold at least) that are considered that matter for it. In the case of children mainly functionings. Health and education for instance, as the authors point out very clearly in the chapter, are fundamental dimensions for the well-being and well-becoming of the child, and should not be optional by any means. Children depends on adults in a gradual way (more as toddlers, and less as teenagers) and this dependency is accompanied by a natural and necessary paternalism which should also decrease through time. Capabilities become then more important until they finally take over.

Once the selection of the relevant functionings and capabilities that matter for justice are chosen (a process which requires of an effective communication between different fields, and of which is example the list preferred by the authors, namely, the one of Biggeri and Mehrotra of 2011) is time to determine the corresponding thresholds (which again requires of empirical knowledge). Otherwise: What are the thresholds below which it can be said that an injustice is taking place? The authors propose here their own version of sufficiency attending to their object of study, i.e. children in welfare states. In these states where absolute thresholds (whatever they are) are supposed to be generally overtaken, the adequate thresholds are determined by the level typically achieved by the children living in them (e.g. the typical levels of education, health, etc.).

Chapter 2 is devoted to the identification of child poverty as unjust given the apparatus provided in the previous chapter. However, before doing that, Schweiger and Graf need to confront first the issue of setting an appropriate metric of child poverty. They discuss that at the beginning of the chapter, where they also introduce the interesting and revealing cases of the official poverty measures in the USA and the EU. The general idea underlying all these metrics may be summarized as follows: 1) choose those goods, resources, activities or capabilities and functionings relevant to the issue of poverty, 2) establish the convenient thresholds for these items, and 3) someone is poor if she does not reach the thresholds of a particular number of items.

After the generous discussion on the way to measure child poverty, the authors eventually focus on the ill-being and ill-becoming generated by child poverty in which concerns three fertile functionings, i.e. three funcionings that not only are by themselves a matter of justice for children, but that also positively influence other functionings and capabilities: health (physical and mental), social inclusion, and education. Evidence is here presented pointing in the direction of the corrosive effects of child poverty in regard to each one of them. Child poverty seems to generally hinder the achievement of the typical level of health, social inclusion and education that enjoy their non-poor peers. Child poverty is thus considered a case of social injustice.

Once the injustice has been located is the moment, in Chapter 3, for responsibilities and actions. The main influence for the authors at this point is Iris Young and the two models of attribution of responsibilities that she distinguishes in *Responsibilities*

for Justice: 1) the liability model, where concrete agents causing harm can be clearly distinguished, and 2) the social connection model, where the concrete responsibilities are blurred because of the structural nature of the processes leading to injustice. In this last model, the responsibilities are shared among those who somehow participate or contribute to the injustice. As a consequence almost everyone is considered responsible, the different being that not all are responsible to the same level. The rank of responsibilities (given an injustice) rests for Young on four different grounds: power (powerful agents since they have the option not only to act but also to influence other agents), privilege (those who live comfortable lives due to the particular injustice that is being committed), interest (those negatively affected by the injustice) and collective ability (collectivities). To these four grounds Schweiger and Graf add a fifth one in order to adapt Young's proposal to the specific case of child poverty. The new ground is closeness (those close to the child, especially through a caring relation).

From these grounds and the distinction of the different groups involved in the well-being and well-becoming of a child in poverty the authors propose a first rank of responsibilities, in which the most responsible agents are considered to be the social and political institutions on the local and state level, and the caregivers. The middle responsibilities are shared among the community of citizens within a society, friendship, leisure and neighborhood, the economy and the labor market, and the political institutions on the international and global level. Finally, the lowest level of responsibility rests on the child herself, and the global human community.

The chapter finishes exploring the two main agents of responsibility for child poverty (the family and the state) as well as the actions they should realize to alleviate it. The authors formulate here the following interesting dilemma (p.148):

If the parents of poor children are responsible for their children's poverty and/or for severe but preventable deprivations due to their poverty, the state has basically four options: to support the parents and help them become better parents and escape poverty; to take the children away and put them in state care; to take the children away and give them to other parents; and as a preventive option, to make it less likely that poor parents have children in the first place.

Schweiger and Graf discuss carefully the four options finding the first one as the most acceptable and adequate for the child. The state must stay vigilant, offering enough support to the poor children and their families, but also taking action if the

bad choices of the parents surpass a certain thresholds. Poor parents are not fully responsible for their behavior towards their children given the distressful situation within which they live, but as the authors point out (p.154) "this does not indicate that they are not responsible at all and that poverty is an excuse for everything".

Chapter 3 finishes with the proposal of two lists: a list of responsibilities of parents towards their children, and a list of responsibilities of the state towards children.

In the final chapter Schweiger and Graf outline an expansion of their analysis of child poverty to a global scale. There can be observed two main modifications: a) Since the context has changed from welfare states to include developing countries is no longer a good option to determine thresholds by means of typical levels of achievement (it may be the case that this typical level is simply not enough). The proposed strategy by the authors is to set universal thresholds for all children wherever they are. A certainly attractive although problematic proposal. b) The second important modification concerns responsibilities (pp. 171-172):

[...] the responsibilities of the agents of justice in regard to global child poverty should be weighted differently [...] the agents on the international and global level have a much higher responsibility, while the states high up on the list when it comes to child poverty in welfare states move down.

Poor countries have limited options to support their citizens, and that make them far less responsible for child poverty than welfare states were. Together with the family the fundamental agent of responsibility and action are the international and global institutions.

With this brief look at global justice finishes the systematic, detailed and very clear book of Gottfried Schweiger and Gunter Graf.

Aránzazu San Ginés
Universidad de Granada