

A PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW OF POVERTY

This review looks at different approaches to poverty in contemporary political philosophy, drawing out key contested concepts that relate to poverty and how we understand it from different theoretical standpoints.

Key points

- Recent philosophical work questions the usefulness of the concept of poverty as traditionally understood as a central focus of analysis for social justice.
- The popular ‘capability approach’ assesses lives in terms of what people can ‘do and be’.
- Many variables influence individual capability, including: personal resources (such as talents and skills); external resources (including, but not limited to, income and wealth) and social and material structures (including legal, cultural, and environmental factors).
- Therefore traditional definitions of poverty in terms of income and wealth isolate just one of the many factors that determine individual capability and well-being.
- The economist and philosopher Amartya Sen proposes that poverty should be re-understood in terms of capability deprivation.
- Doing so, however, has far-reaching consequences. Poverty will be very hard to measure, and such a change disconnects the concept of poverty from more than a century of detailed empirical and theoretical research.
- In addition, poverty is such an important determinant of low capability it deserves particular attention.
- For practical, political and pragmatic reasons the traditional concept should be retained, but it must be understood that eliminating poverty will not guarantee social justice or well-being for all, as even those who do not suffer from poverty may well suffer from capability deprivation for other reasons.

The research

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JUNE 2015

BACKGROUND

This review reflects on major contributions to recent political philosophy on social justice, equality and poverty in order to help understand the root causes of poverty.

This study considers the following questions:

- What position do the major philosophical traditions take on poverty?
- How do key principles such as social citizenship, equality, fairness, personal responsibility and liberty relate to poverty?
- What are the key contested philosophical concepts in relation to poverty – for example luck and desert?

The report reviews work in contemporary political philosophy seeking to address these questions, which were initially broken down into three practical areas:

- What is poverty?
- What is wrong with poverty?
- What should be done about poverty?

For clarity, however, we also felt it necessary to ask a further range of questions.

- Is a clear, coherent **definition** of poverty possible?
- Is the definition **descriptively adequate**, picking out only those who would ordinarily be recognised to be in poverty?
- Does the definition pick out a **distinct moral** category?
- What moral reasons do we have to be **concerned** about poverty?

In reviewing the literature in philosophy we found that relatively few writers in contemporary political philosophy made the notion of poverty central to their theories of social justice, or even paid much attention to the question of poverty. One reason for this is that much political philosophy concentrates on exploring the conditions of a fully just 'ideal' society, and in such a society there is, of course, no poverty.

However, a deeper reason is that poverty is generally defined in terms of not having sufficient resources to meet a particular set of basic needs. The interest in resources, in terms of income and wealth is, therefore, instrumental: what matters is meeting needs, or avoiding deprivation. Yet there are various ways in which individuals can suffer from deprivation, such as through disability or discrimination, even if you have access to a reasonable level of resources. Hence philosophers such as Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum argue that poverty needs to be redefined as 'capability deprivation', however it comes about, rather than low income.

While recognising the importance and insight of Sen and Nussbaum's theory of human well-being in terms of capabilities – what people are able to do and be – the authors conclude, on a number of grounds, that poverty should not be redefined. First, they do not have a practical proposal for how poverty is to be measured, especially in the developed world. Second, their proposal disconnects the concern for poverty from current policy campaigns and policy initiatives. Third, it would be very confusing to refer to someone with a high level of income and wealth as 'poor' by virtue of disability or discrimination. The authors recommend retaining traditional understandings of poverty, with the caveat that overcoming poverty will not necessarily be sufficient to achieve social justice.

With these thoughts in mind we can now return to the questions:

What is poverty?

Although they have discussed the proposal of Sen (and Nussbaum) that the concept of poverty should be redefined in terms of capability deprivation at length, the authors felt that this is conceptually unhelpful. They believe poverty should be restricted to forms of capability deprivation that are related to low income and wealth, maintaining the traditional definitions of poverty. Absolute poverty is living at such a low level of income and wealth that one's health, or even survival, is threatened. Relative poverty is living at a level of income that does not allow one to take part in the normal or encouraged activities for one's society. The authors also agree with South African philosopher Hennie Lotter's observation that poverty is a distinctively human phenomenon. Animals can be ill-nourished and poorly sheltered, but it would not normally be appropriate to talk about animals living in poverty (unless perhaps they lived in a human household that was poor).

What is wrong with poverty?

In a way the answer to this question follows directly from the definition of poverty. Human beings have vital needs such as health and inclusion in social groups. People in poverty are unable to meet their needs, and therefore suffer from forms of deprivation. In addition we support the view that poverty is an affront to human dignity. There is a further egalitarian argument that those who are in poverty through underserved bad luck suffer from an injustice and there is some merit to this. However, the distinction between luck and choice can be very difficult to make in practice.

What should be done about poverty?

Poverty is a lack of resources to meet particular needs. The obvious solution is to redistribute income. However, improving the opportunities of people in poverty to earn for themselves through training and job creation will very often be a more favoured solution as it is both more sustainable and also supports self-respect and other aspects of human flourishing. Poverty can also be reduced by making some goods more affordable: at the extreme taking them out of the market and making them free, or heavily subsidised, at the point of consumption. We noted, however, that there can be difficulties in relieving relative poverty when 'positional goods' are needed to fit in with society. Positional goods, such as status goods, by definition cannot be enjoyed by everyone.

Regarding the four sub-questions:

- *Is a clear, coherent, **definition** of poverty possible?*

We believe so, subject to the complications set out above.

- *Is the definition **descriptively adequate**, picking out only those who would ordinarily be recognised to be in poverty?*

This has not been tested in detail. However, Sen's alternative definition was rejected on the grounds that it included some people (wealthy but ill, or subject to discrimination) who would not count as poor in any ordinary understanding of the term.

- *Does the definition pick out a **distinct moral** category?*

This is the most difficult issue. Sen proposed a new definition essentially because poverty does not pick out a distinct moral category. The morally important category is capability deprivation, and poverty is just one cause of capability deprivation. There is nothing morally more special about lack of resources, in itself, than other causal factors that can deprive people of capabilities. Of course in special circumstances there can be morally important reasons to pick out poverty as a special cause, if, for example, it is the result of previous injustice, such as colonialism. But otherwise poverty does not appear to be a distinct moral category. Nevertheless the fact that poverty is such a significant cause of capability deprivation, and that it is measurable and a possible focus for particular social policy is, in our view, adequate justification for retaining the concept of poverty.

- What moral reasons do we have to be **concerned** about poverty?

Where people are in poverty through no fault of their own, it clearly follows from many theories of social justice that it is just that such poverty should be relieved. If people have, in some clear way, brought their poverty on themselves the case in terms of justice may be much weaker, or even disappear altogether. Yet even in these cases there seems a strong case in terms of compassion or basic humanity to relieve poverty if it is possible to do so.

Conclusion

Amartya Sen's proposal that poverty should be redefined in terms of capability deprivation has strong philosophical support; from a moral point of view, there is nothing special about lack of resources as a cause of diminished capability. However, in the world as it is, individual or family lack of resources is an extremely significant reason for capability deprivation, and therefore there are strong political and historical reasons to focus on resources. The authors of this review recommend retaining a traditional definition of poverty in terms of an individual or family lacking the resources to meet a defined set of needs. Yet we need to be aware that eliminating poverty will not overcome all capability deprivation. Nevertheless, justice, human dignity, and basic humanity demand that society relieves poverty wherever possible, whether by means of resource transfer or the broader provision of public services.

About the project

This study took the form of desk research. The authors conducted an electronic search on The Philosophers' Index for all philosophical writings with 'poverty' in the title or abstract. These were filtered manually to establish a reading list of relevant articles. Further investigation of the bibliographies of these papers revealed writings not in the original list, and this process continued until they were satisfied all relevant papers had been found. In addition they reviewed standard bibliographies in contemporary political philosophy to identify writings that had a bearing on questions of poverty but did not explicitly use the term.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

This summary is part of JRF's research and development programme. The views are those of the authors and not necessarily those of JRF.

The main report, **A philosophical review of poverty** by Jonathan Wolff, Edward Lamb and Eliana Zur-Szpiro, is available as a free download at www.jrf.org.uk

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ISSN 0958-3084

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