

Book Reviews

The Rich and the Poor.

By Philip Kitcher.

Polity Press, 2025, 240 pages, £25 (hardback).

With his latest book, Philip Kitcher joins a rather established, cross-disciplinary tradition across economics, political economy, political philosophy etc. that identifies the ills of contemporary global neoliberal capitalism, mostly focusing on all the forms of existing and growing inequalities between countries, regions, and humans. However, Kitcher aims not at just providing yet another diagnosis of these ills in his short, five-chapter book, but to add an ethical methodology that endeavours to treat the ‘erosion of kindness’ stemming from the lack of political will to bring the human race back to the path of shared, equal prosperity.

This is an ambitious project, to say the least, and the strengths of ‘*The Rich and The Poor*’ lies in the first two chapters impressive and passionately written diagnosis of what is wrong with contemporary capitalism. Kitcher doesn’t merely conceptualise the directions and trends in inequality in a quantitative way, (although the elephant graph does find its way into the book) but leads the reader to a deeper understanding of the impact inequalities have on the quality of life of those affected by it the most. He further positions his own analysis and ethical methodology in contrast to “two cultures” in moral philosophy usually associated with the discussion of this topic: political realism, according to which “it is naïve and dangerous to think that moral ideals can ever dictate policy”; and, moral idealism, where “important moral principles cannot be overridden” (Kitcher, 2025, p.7). The pragmatic nature of his ethical methodology tasks us “to look for viable schemes for modifying socioeconomic arrangements, to instil capabilities, so that *more* people live *better* than they currently do” (Kitcher, 2025, p.109, italics in the original). Building on Amartya Sen’s and Martha Nussbaum’s capabilities approach to human development in the context of ‘rethinking aid’, Kitcher argues for ethical inquiry through pragmatic progress using collective, ideal deliberation. This collective, ideal deliberation is defined in the central third chapter as a result from discussions by people “who collectively represent the perspectives of all those affected by the issue”, who use only well-grounded information, and who are seeking outcomes that all can tolerate (Kitcher, 2025, p.98), while allowing for rough edges and incomplete solutions to certain issues which then require further deliberation.

This itself appears to be rather idealistic as a viable ethical methodology, but Kitcher (2025, p.98) recognises that requiring ideal deliberation as “being inclusive, well-informed, and mutually beneficial” is far from “the conversations people actually have about vexed ethical, social, and political questions”. The

way he addresses this critical point, and sets boundaries with his reply, reveals the (in my view) shortcomings of this book. The first is the role of ideology, which I think Kitcher thoroughly underestimates here. While he touches on free market fundamentalism in the fourth chapter to illustrate how ethical ideal deliberation can have a corrective effect on market and distributional outcomes, he seem to shy away from the ideological power of neoliberalism to redefine, through the ethics of self-interest, concepts such as liberty, freedom, democracy, the role of the state, and others, in the context of free market fundamentalism where any alternative, collaborative vision of society is essentially suppressed (Brown, 2015; Earle, Moran and Ward-Perkins, 2017; Waller and Wrenn, 2023). This is a much more challenging but important issues for his pragmatism.

The second, and more severe limitation of his book is his treatment of a large part of the global population, specifically in the Global South; those who take their religious beliefs serious and tend to appeal, in their deliberation, “to certain kinds of authorities, including allegedly divinely inspired texts” (Kitcher, 2025, p.103). This ought to be prohibited according to Kitcher because believers “should pause to reflect on the moral character of a deity who puts blind obedience ahead of thoughtful investigation” (Kitcher, 2025, p.105). The subsequent acknowledgment that this prohibition limits the inclusiveness of his approach is not only an understatement, but it reveals a caricatures of the otherwise more nuanced way people across the globe engage with their religious beliefs and essentially turns this pragmatic ideal deliberation into a Global North centric approach. If at all, the archetypal nature of religious stories about morality allows the desired deliberation to function between participants of significantly different cultural and religious backgrounds. Despite these shortcomings, I believe it is still a book worth reading.

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