

Penultimate draft – forthcoming in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*

Thompson, Janna, *Should Current Generations Make Reparation for Slavery?*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018, pp. ix + 122, £9.99 (paperback).

This book's audience is the lay reader. It seeks to provide a philosophically sophisticated, yet accessible, introduction to reparations for slavery. Such sophistication is necessary because the reparations debate implicates many philosophical concepts, to include the non-identity problem, collective responsibility, desert, and diachronic identity. Thompson discusses these in due course, and in a welcome, measured tone.

In addition to its preface and conclusion, the book consists of three parts plus a short but helpful bibliography. Part 1 provides a brief history of slavery and an overview of relevant concepts. Part 2 critically considers three arguments for reparations. These are arguments based in (i) a libertarian principle of rectification, (ii) the prevention of "unjust enrichment", and (iii) ending the "continuing harm" of slavery. Thompson endorses each, but only in limited circumstances; none provides universal justification for reparations. Instead, (i) justifies the payment of reparations to Haiti by France; (ii) justifies payments to African nations by Britain, and (iii) justifies reparations for black Americans. Part 3 attempts to draw policy prescriptions from the moral lessons of the previous part.

Thompson's arguments rest, to a degree, on the idea that whether reparations should be paid or not stands independent of considerations of distributive justice: "To make entitlement to reparation subordinate to the requirements of distributive justice is to make it hostage to differing views about what is distributively just" (p. 17). To be sure, but is that subordination so implausible? One natural objection to reparations is that they are *unjust*—because they sometimes redistribute wealth from disadvantaged people (e.g.

whites born into poverty) to advantaged people (blacks born into wealth). Slavery was one injustice among many in our past—and we ought, on this line, to allow none of them to affect us now. That is, we ought to provide an equal opportunity to all.

Attention to objections like these, and distributive justice more broadly, would have provided the reader with a fuller understanding of both the allure of and the aversion to reparations. Nevertheless, Thompson serviceably introduces a number of relevant arguments and concepts, making the book a useful jumping-off point for lay readers who wish to start thinking rigorously about reparations.

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