

# WHAT DO WE OWE THE GLOBAL POOR?

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**Abstract.** Discourse on socioeconomic globalization has become unconceivable without calls for distributive justice. Among different philosophical accounts widespread allegiance is gained by the idea of humanitarianism. However, we ought to ask whether the poor's sufficiency to survive discharges the comparatively better-off from further redistributive obligations. This essay attempts to advance an answer to this question by investigating which grounds of justice appear plausible in the given context. First, I will reject purely relational accounts of redistributive justice, which – in light of the empirical facts – de facto exclude large parts of the global population from the realm of justice. Second, I will outline that distributive justice comprises relational and non-relational features. However, to bestow content on the former the preliminary condition of equal opportunity to participation in the socioeconomic world order has to be satisfied, the imposition of which then becomes the liability of the comparatively better-off.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Our world has become a 'global village'. Yet, it is a village that is characterized by intruding inequality. While the most blessed enjoy safari trips in sub-Saharan Africa, high-technology toys manufactured in East Asia and indulge in Caribbean's exotic fruits, one fourth of the global population struggles to survive with less than \$1.25 a day (United Nations 2012). The question of justice imposes itself on everybody who does not turn a blind eye on these empirical facts. So, what do we owe the global poor?

First of all, the stylization of this question begs for clarification. Who are 'we' - the ones whose potential responsibility is called upon? What is 'poverty' anyway? I use 'we' to refer to all the comparatively better-off. Inversely, the term 'poor' shall include all those who are comparatively worse-off. One may ask whether these standards hold. Prominent concepts such as the UN Millenium Development Goals or Sustainable Development impressively show the versatility of poverty. Among others it encompasses issues of education, health, general living conditions, income, gender equality and environmental concerns. All of these issues are important and deserve treatment in their own right. Therefore, I will draw on the more general notion of relative socioeconomic deprivation, which directly and indirectly touches upon many of the concerns mentioned above. In this spirit, the question at hand may be rephrased as follows: what do the socioeconomically better-off owe the socioeconomically worse-off? Although this restatement eliminates some of the ambiguities of its predecessor, it remains almost prohibitively sketchy.

What goods exactly are socioeconomic in character? How does their simultaneous presence or individual absence impinge on the notion of ‘poverty’? According to which threshold is somebody better or worse off? These are reasonable questions, which nevertheless cannot be addressed here. I trust that the general understanding of the following exposition will not be inhibited by this imperfect specification, and I am convinced that its conclusions will remain unaffected by this inconvenience.

Second, it seems unreasonable to determine what the better-off owe the poor without a prior understanding of why they owe the poor anything at all. Therefore, this work will establish its conclusions by exploring the underlying features that justify a demand for global justice. In this spirit, humanitarianism serves as a starting point that gathers allegiance by most theories of distributive justice. Consequently, I will critically examine the internationalist account. After establishing its implausibility, a version of globalism will be outlined, according to which a sound account of socioeconomic justice must always comprise both, a relational and a non- relational component. Once furnished with a clear understanding of the grounds of justice in global socioeconomic matters, a dyad of obligations for the better-off will be formulated.

## **II. THE OVERARCHING CONSENSUS**

Many people would argue that we should provide relief to large scale famines if we are in a position to do so. Similarly, many would claim that we have an obligation to save the life of another human being, unless an intolerable sacrifice would be imposed on us. From a theoretical perspective these intuitions for the need of humanitarian intervention can be substantiated using different routes. On the level of monist theories, the Kantian could call for the necessity of famine relief based on the belief that in absence of a disposition to beneficence, the principle of action failed the test of contradiction in the will (O’Neill 1998). Henceforth, only the maxim to help would be universalizable with regard to large scale famines. On the contrary, the utilitarian could derive the same conclusion from the principle of utility maximization, establishing a duty to help until the marginal utility gains of the helped are outweighed by the marginal utility losses of the helper (Singer 1972). A justification in the dualist tradition is outlined by Nagel (2005). Being faced with the constraints of the internationalist doctrine of justice (see section 3), he unceremoniously excludes the need for humanitarian intervention from the realm of justice. According to his version, humanitarian intervention merely reflects “a minimal concern” for fellow human beings, while it is not a requirement of justice as such.

Based on this shared understanding among different theories, one can draw the following intermediate conclusion regarding the question at hand: irrespective of any contingencies, human beings have a right to the basic goods, which are needed for their survival. In case these needs cannot be catered for auto-sufficiently, the necessary goods ought to be provided by those in a

position to do so – a duty naturally involving the better-off.

Yet, the crucial question is whether the liability of the socioeconomically better-off transcends this minimal threshold of sufficiency.

### **III. THE IMPLAUSIBILITY OF INTERNATIONALISM**

Roughly sketched, the internationalist doctrine claims that the call for redistribution does not apply beyond what has been outlined above as the demand of humanitarianism. Rather, the scope of distributive justice remains confined to the nation state. There are distinct justifications for such a view. According to one, the submission to the coercive power in the domains of taxation and private law must be justified by equality in economic goods (Blake 2001). A second version establishes that the submission to the regulatory forces of the state reflects an implicit appraisal of the values embodied in these legal provisions. In order to find this appraisal, they must be acceptable to all citizens, entailing a demand for distributive justice (Nagel 2005). On the contrary, Sangiovanni (2007) detects the call for distributive justice in the reciprocity which we owe to all those who contribute to the perpetuation of the state – for their part putting us in a position to “act on a plan of life”. While such a contribution is made by all compatriots, it is not by non-citizens. Despite these differences, all versions of the internationalist doctrine hold in common that the nation state provides a distinct framework of relationships<sup>1</sup> among its citizens which is not established by the institutions of international cooperation as they exist today. Consequently, the principles of distributive justice only apply within the borders of the nation state.

From my perspective, it is debatable to what degree international institutions are insufficiently coercive, demand negligible appraisals from nation-state citizens, or contribute too little to assure the continued existence of the state in order to warrant a limitation of distributive justice to the nation state. Yet, I think it is reasonable to accept the claim that on average the institutions internal to the nation state put fellow citizens in a comparatively stronger relationship with each other than with non-citizens. The question remains whether this particular relationship alone exhausts the conditions for distributive justice to apply or whether it is merely a sufficient, but not necessary condition we can refer to in questions of socioeconomic justice. To borrow a distinction from Sangiovanni, I accept the empirical claim that domestic institutions portray a special nature, but in what follows I will argue that this does not establish moral significance in a way to confine redistribution to the national level.

The crucial flaw of the internationalist doctrine is that it designs distributive justice as an exclusive relational concept. The internationalist does not discriminate a priori as to whom are ineligible to

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<sup>1</sup> In the following the term ‘relationship’ will be used as a collective term to represent the specific conditions for distributive justice marked-off by coercion (Blake), appraisal (Nagel) and reciprocity (Sangiovanni).

the benefits of justice, yet she does discriminate in the light of the empirical facts. Let's assume the internationalist is right in confining distributive justice to the national level. Looking at the state of the world, I feel urged to ask: what about those who live in states where coercion is not justified by the realization of a fair share of economic holdings? How can the right to justice be realized in case of those whose state lacks the resources to build national institutions firm enough to be responsive to the justified quests of its citizens? Is the right to justice for them a pure formality with no hope for actual realization? According to Sangiovanni (2007), "[w]e owe obligations of egalitarian reciprocity to fellow citizens and residents in the state, who provide us with the basic conditions and guarantees necessary to develop and act on a plan of life, but not to noncitizens, who do not." To be frank, I am convinced many Somalians would love to bear some of the Frenchmen's burden in guaranteeing the continued existence of the 5th Republic, if these burdens put them in a position to benefit from its redistributive regime. Similarly, many would love to subject themselves to the coercion of Finnish authorities, if it entitled them to access the country's widely praised general education system. But unfortunately the internationalist does not mention global freedom of movement as a necessary prerequisite for her account of justice. Quite the opposite, "everyone may have the right to live in a just society, but we do not have an obligation to live in a just society with everyone" (Nagel 2005). If we accept the first part of the quote and take the matter of global justice serious enough to stand off cynicism, we cannot accept the internationalist account. The alleged claim of right to justice would be reduced to a mere formality, with no chance of realization whatsoever for a vast share of the global population. The assumptions of the internationalist simply square with the observation that some state authorities lack capacities, will, or both to build appropriate institutions that cater the purposes of redistributive justice. Therefore, if we want justice to be more than a luxury good open to the exclusive club of peoples from developed countries while being an empty concept for all others, we must reject the internationalist doctrine.

#### **IV. GLOBALISM – BUT WHY?**

Having suggested an argument against the internationalist doctrine, one should accept the fact that the scope of distributive justice transcends state borders. Still we are left to define whether demands for justice are derived from a pattern of relations we entertain across borders, or whether they would persist even in absence of cooperation.

Some may argue that the non-relational content of distributive justice was exhausted by the humanitarian concern proposed above. From this perspective any further quests for redistribution could only arise from the global web of relations among different actors. However, I disagree with such a minimal conception of non-relational justice.

To be sure, distributive justice has relational content. So far, the treatment of this essay's issue

bore an implicit reference to the global community as a system of international cooperation. This assumption obtains credibility in the light of soaring cross-border migration, the increasing establishment of free trade areas, and the evolvment of international organizations to coordinate and promote these newly evolved institutions. The very degree of socioeconomic integration now paves the way for a relational principle of distributive justice:

*Each country and its citizens shall reap a fair share of benefits and shall carry a fair share of burdens evolving from the interactions they entertain. If these shares are not established by transmission of the market mechanism, the just outcome shall be consummated by means of redistribution.*

We do not need to specify the underlying egalitarian principle of justice, or, put differently, the meaning of the term ‘fair’ in order to make this provision credible. Obviously, interactions yield benefits and burdens for each of the affected parties. If one party objectively bears a disproportionate share of burdens, it would not voluntarily choose to engage in this very interaction given a rational and informed decision process. If it still does, there must be outer influences determining the decision outcome. These outer influences are coercive in the sense of obstructing the party to decide sovereignly for its own good and therefore need additional justification. In absence of such a justification, the party has a right to be compensated for such interference at its disadvantage by the ones who benefit from it. In this sense the call for distributive justice only arises between specific parties and does not extend to others. Hypothetically assume resource R to be the only commodity of interest in a stylized world, where country S is a resource monopolist and country C one of its customers. S has a right to be proportionally compensated by C for the cost related to the exploitation of R. It has a claim for a fair share of benefits from the interaction even if markets do not reflect the total cost, i.e. exclude environmental damages, in terms of prices.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, any other country O has no such justified claim on C, as it does not engage in the exploitation of R.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, O has no duty to compensate S if it does not source R since it does not benefit from the cost incurred by S. The claims and duties related to distributive justice only arise from the R-specific interaction between S and C – they are relational in character.

Yet, distributive justice additionally requires a concern for the capacity of willing parties to engage in such mutually beneficial relationships. For illustration, consider the case of a paralyzed person. Intuitively we would, and empirically in most societies we do, compensate a paralyzed person for her to become a cooperating member of society. We provide her with mobility devices, assistance in educational institutions or specific physiotherapies, wanting her to overcome the additional challenges she is facing in developing skills and knowledge that are valuable to others in society.

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2 For instance, consider price collusion by the total set of customers.

3 Naturally, it may have other justified claims for compensation based on the interactions it entertains with the C, say with regard to resource R2.

As far as possible we strive to put people in positions of auto-sufficiency, in which they can sustain their livelihood based on interactions with others independently of continued assistance. Wouldn't we be repulsed by the claim that the paralyzed person deserves nothing more than her minimum needs because distributive justice only requires compensation if backed-up by already existing economic transactions?<sup>4</sup>

Transferring this intuition from the individual level to the field of global justice, we should hold that relational distributive justice is not enough. As has been argued in section 3, many countries do not have the capacities to develop institutions firm enough to act on principles of distributive justice. Mirroring this 'internal paralyzation', others bear an 'external paralyzation' in the sense of being incapable to become a member of the system of global cooperation without prior assistance.<sup>5</sup> As in the internationalist case, distributive justice would remain an empty concept for these countries and their people if we based the globalist account solely on relational grounds. To strengthen this intuition, consider the conclusions from modernization theory which postulate that institutional quality follows economic prosperity (Glaeser et al. 2004). In this spirit, 'internal paralyzation' could follow from 'external paralyzation'. Prior to the application of the relational principles outlined above, every member of the global community has a right to be put in a position for cooperation with other countries. We cannot simply say: "Pace Somalia, but right now you do not happen to be an attractive trading partner; a fact which also undermines any of your claims to redistribution beyond humanitarian concern. Care packages of rice and tents to keep your citizens alive is all you could reasonably hope for." Rather, a preliminary demand of distributive justice could be formulated as follows:

*Each country and its citizens willing to be part of the global community should be given a fair opportunity to become an equal member in the given system of international socioeconomic cooperation.*

However, this request embodies a non-relational aspect of distributive justice, the preliminary satisfaction of which bestows content upon the relational principles of justice.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

This essay started by highlighting humanitarianism as a common ground of different theories of global justice. Beyond this consensus different conceptions of distributive justice would yield vastly diverging answers regarding the question 'What do we owe the poor?'

From my perspective, a plausible version of distributive justice must comprise both, relational

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4 The same held true if we would abstract from the instrumental perspective and substituted the sub-clause "that are valuable to others in society" by something with a more absolutist flavour like "that enable her to live a decent life".

5 The concepts of 'external paralyzation' and 'internal paralyzation' of course are not mutually exclusive.

and non-relational principles. Essential for this conclusion is the assumption that a conception of justice must not be tailored in a way to de facto exclude some people in the light of the empirical facts. Justice is no luxury good whose accessibility is confined to the ones who were lucky enough to satisfy the contingencies that give rise to its application. On the contrary, everyone must have a non-conditional and fair opportunity to experience its realization. Therefore, it has non-relational content. Such a view necessarily excludes any internationalist conception, the proponents of which derive the claim for distributive justice from the special relations among compatriots. Similarly, it excludes globalist conceptions that solely rely on relational principles of justice. Furthermore, the internationalist cannot capture the non-contingent fact that the scope of justice includes every human being. In this spirit, justice furnishes the relatively worse-off with the following two claims:

1. To become an equal member of the system of international cooperation if they desire to be so.
2. Once a member of the system of international cooperation, to realize a fair share of burdens and benefits from the arising interactions.

These claims apply to the entire global community and therefore include the relatively better-off. While the second principle assigns a clear responsibility to the individual parties of interaction, the first one remains vague regarding the ones whose responsibility is called upon. Naturally, such a conception involves a notion of capacity and also historic liability. In both cases it seems reasonable to assume that the relatively better-off bear a particular responsibility to realize the first principle. However, a detailed disentanglement of these questions must be consummated in an independent treatment.

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