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What, if anything, grounds obligations held by individual citizens in the wealthy nations to the global poor? What, if anything, limits those obligations?

Global Justice: 3007 of 3000 words

Introduction:

1. Obligations to the global poor are met by diverse hierarchical agents, each further removed from individual citizen. Individual humanitarian obligations may be directly realised through donations to NGO's such as Oxfam and Christian Aid involved in disaster relief and development programs. Nation states a proxy for personal morality often have self-serving reasons for 'assisting' the global poor, and finally world bodies such as the UN and the World Bank, charged with dispensing global justice have agendas dominated by anonymous voices from wealthy powerful nations.

[Gillian Broch, \(SEP,2015\)](#) references the two main systems¹ for carrying out our individual obligations to the global poor, viz., world-wide or national governance, whereby citizens of mainly liberal democratic wealthy nations, in concert, may expedite their humanitarian obligations, hereafter referred to as 'global justice'², as expressed in the [UN Declaration of Human Rights](#).

Two philosophical models for global justice will be considered. Cosmopolitanism where the unit of moral concern is the individual and the agent of change supra-national world governance, and Liberal Nationalism where the unit of moral concern is the state and justice is administered primarily to its 'peoples'³, most often states or their territories.

2. [Pike, J., \(2017\)](#), unpacking [Singer, P., \(1972\)](#), suggests the set of general premises that ground individual citizen's obligations to the global poor. P1) suffering and death for lack of resources is bad, P2) if we prevent this happening without sacrificing something morally equivalent then we should do so, P3) it is in our power to prevent suffering and death without undue sacrifice. Therefore, we should do something to prevent suffering and death from lack of resources.

P3 is an empirical matter and P2 a moral normative matter. This dichotomy invites various empirical theses for preventing suffering and death that have diverse distributive justice effects that may not fully deliver our individual obligations.

Cosmopolitanism:

1. [Singer,\(1972, pp.235\)](#), sees our direct obligations to the global poor not as charity but as a moral requirement, we 'ought to give all away and it is wrong not to do so' to remedy dire poverty.

¹ Not counting political, colonial, ethnic, religious alliances, etc., that operate in parallel.

²Particularly Articles,23-25

³ [Rawls](#)

Singer's key moral premise, P2) above, means we have a moral duty to intervene, 'individually or in concert', to ensure justice for everyone everywhere. The image of the drowning child, Singer,(1972, pp.231) calls for immediate action so long as we do not sacrifice something of significant moral worth.

Singer's empirical thesis is simply to help unreservedly, the 'needs of the global poor' are paramount at least in preventing starvation. Singer,(1972, pp.229,30), criticises Anglo-French losses on Concorde and Australian spending on the Sydney Opera House, instead of preventing famine in East Bengal, 'valuing Indian lives so cheaply'⁴. Similarly, India is condemned for not diverting development program monies. There should be no limits to our moral obligations, a thesis that condemns spending on trivia rather than giving to famine relief, that in extremis would result in giving away everything to achieve parity between donor and recipient.

Disagreement is futile, Singer,(1972, pp.236,38) cites Urmson who argues on societal grounds that 'it is quite inessential' to help others outside of one's own group, with our principal duty being to the proximate morals codes of the society that produced them. For Singer insists this does not trump the key moral premise P2), our obligations to global citizens. Likewise, Utilitarian arguments on optimising global justice are trumped by the key moral premise as they might leave individuals worse off for overall utilitarian benefit.

2. Wener, L., (2003) agrees with Singer, that we have moral duties to 'distant others', there is a humanitarian 'contractual'⁵ duty to do 'what we can to help'. However, Wener,(2003,pp.291), does not wish moral philosophy to obscure political theory or economics, and wants to analyse and quantify the return on giving. It is an empirical question, 'we have to justify our moral duties to ourselves and others', and this includes proximate others bound by relationships. While universal duties take priority, we have to recognise our psychology, Wener,(2003,pp.286), we naturally attend to our relationships and allegiances, family, group identity, and nationality. Our proximate moral duty to those in need can be more efficacious in a manner that cosmopolitanism or utilitarianism cannot address, since we are best aware of how ameliorate adversity in the society we share together.

Wener,(2003, pp.287), reflects on Scanlon's views on contractual duties that parallel Rawls principles of 'rightness as fairness': actions as morally right if they do not leave some people disadvantaged, empirical duties need not require disproportionate sacrifice and should distribute benefits in a targeted manner. However, the moral question and the empirical question need to be quantified. The empirical thesis that small sacrifices by the rich can bring large benefits to the global poor is not reflected in the fact that little progress has been made in the last 50 years, a reduction in percentage terms but increased absolute number of those in dire poverty. This disconnect between giving and progress poverty undermines this familiar thesis. Return on a dollar of aid needs to be quantified, Wener,(2003,pp.291)

⁴ According to Singer 30 times less valued

⁵ After Scanlon

Critiquing cosmopolitanism from inside the tent [Wener, L., \(2006\)](#) calls for transparency, accountability and democracy in international development aid projects, including NGO's such as OXFAM, particularly the requirement for proper project control and performance monitoring. [Wener](#) calls for recognition of complexity, {human norms, culture, economic structures, gender and equality}. If the 'iron law of political economy', [Wener,\(2006,pp.3,4\)](#) that 'resources flow to those who have power' then it is likely that resources will be diverted from intended beneficiaries to corrupt officials, criminals and warlords.

Many of the existing structures for delivering aid, are amoral. [Wener,\(2006,pp.12\)](#) points out that much National aid is self-serving and 'nothing to do with the poor', USAID is designed by the State Department to reward political allies and by Congress to reward interest groups such as agriculture exporters with excess production. The World Bank and OECD fail to make aid provisional on good governance, instead they legitimise corrupt despots who misappropriate the money to their own accounts, leaving their citizens to pick up the bill. NGO's are perversely accountable to their sponsors and the governments where they operate, not to the global poor. Often no valid metric⁶ is offered with which to judge effects on the reduction of poverty or the success of projects, instead they are concerned with their image⁷ and supply uncritical reports.

2. [Pogge, T., W. \(2005\)](#), argues that global supra-national institutions harm the poor and are responsible for maintaining dire poverty in the 3rd world. They show institutional disregard for the poor as a consequence of wealthy nations own self-interests for dominance in global trade and political reach. Pogge's analysis demonstrates that supranational bodies like the World Bank are the instruments of wealthy nations through asymmetrical lobbying and poorer nations and corrupt heads of state themselves become the instruments of implementing wealthy nations self-interests to exploit the natural resources and labour of poor nations. Global tariffs, labour laws and patents all benefit the wealthy nations driving a 'race to the bottom' for poor nations that exploits labour and human rights to produce goods at lowest prices.

Over the last 25 years the imbalance of income distribution has increased in line with the growth in globalisation. This has harmed the poor and we should revise the institutions and compensate for the harm done. Pogge's moral premise P2 is that we have a negative duty, 'not to harm and the poor', but we have, and the poor should be compensated for such harm as an act of global justice.

The Lockean proviso that 'we should leave enough for others' has been violated as a consequence of our 'common violent history' of wars, genocides, colonialism and enslavement. Now, 'millions are born into an unequal world' with little opportunity or resources to obtain 'there fair share and enough', [Pogge, T. W. \(2001, pp.64\)](#).

⁶ Ratio of fund raising to admin costs is meaningless

⁷ 2017, OXFAM staff involved in sexual abuse scandal

Pogge, like Singer, is uncompromising on the moral premise, 'severe poverty is a violation of negative duties' and our supra-national institutions the cause. Cosmopolitan individual obligations are manifest in a creative empirical thesis, the Global Resources Dividend (GRD), to tax the rich and give to the poor and ASAP an alliance of academics to ensure ethical purchasing and research into the causes of poverty, [Pogge, \(2017, The Open University\)](#).

However, Pogge's moral premise is criticised by [Satz, \(2005, pp.48,9\)](#). Individuals of wealthy nations cannot be held directly responsible for harming the global poor, the causal chain too complicated, both global and endogenous agents are involved, e.g., the IMF continued to lend to the totalitarian President Mobutu of Zaire, who 'did nothing to reduce domestic poverty' and instead 'expropriated billions of development dollars' for his own personal wealth. The premise is also critiqued as morally objectional, [Satz, \(2005, pp.51,4\)](#), with its commonality with Libertarianism, 'not to cause harm', and the corollary that 'failing to provide charity is not a harm'. Additionally, for Satz, Pogge's rejection of a duty to help the poor of Venus is amoral and not a proper reading of Locke's position of those in desperate need, Satz proposes a more ecumenical position of positive and negative duties: there are duties of humanity and duties of justice.

In summary:

Singer's moral thesis P2 entails citizens positive obligations to prevent harm while Pogge's entails the citizens negative obligations not to cause harm. Singer's morality can be challenged via its empirical thesis, a reliance on amoral cosmopolitan global delivery bodies such as the World Bank that have patently failed to deliver global justice. Pogge's moral thesis can be more directly challenged on humanitarian grounds, withholding of charity towards those in dire need, simply because we did not cause those dire circumstances. Pogge's empirical thesis also leaves much to be explained on how GRD and ASAP will not fall prey to the very same exploitative self-interests of human nature that beset the current failed systems of global justice.

Liberal Nationalism:

1. [Rawls, \(1993, pp.46,7\)](#), sets out seven principles for co-operation between 'peoples', often in practice nation states, which formalise the State as the responsible agent for its citizens⁸, and interaction with other States. These principles extol honourable behaviours and interactions between 'peoples' including the principle of non-intervention.

This has implications for global justice, namely States should look to their own resources in dealing with dire poverty, although Rawls like Locke softens this position between peoples by requiring mutual 'assistance in times of famine or drought', ensuring 'peoples basic needs are met'. This was enshrined in an eighth principle that peoples have a 'duty to assist other peoples, living under conditions that prevent them having a just or decent political regime'.

⁸ Including foreigners

Unlike nation states with their history of self-interest, shared institutions of Law, Property and class, Rawls, believes a global world state, lacking such cohesion would be ineffective and prey to factional claims, or descend into despotism⁹. Nagel, T. (2005, pp.115,6) agrees that without a global sovereign with power to enforce humanitarian ideals there would be no global justice. By contrast nation states have humanitarian duties towards their citizens and the sovereign power to act.

Beitz, (2000, pp.670-76), summarises Rawls' position, at the limit, 'a realistic utopia' of liberal states with shared values and institutions converges with cosmopolitan liberalism to deliver international justice. 'The Law of Peoples' sets out a liberal theory of foreign policy based the Rawls' eight principles that value other well-ordered societies. In such a world their common goals should obviate the need for any global sovereign power. Well-ordered societies are not necessarily liberal, so Islamic states that observe human rights, have transparent justice systems that do not pursue aggressive foreign policy aims may be included in this consensus of the good, under the heading of decent non-liberal peoples. Only outlaw states and burdened states are outside this coalition of peoples. Nations states have a duty to reduce inequality locally and if all well-ordered societies carry out this duty, in addition to duties to assist other states in times of famine, and assist burdened states, then excepting outlaw states, individual human rights are respected and global justice prevails.

Others might take the view that obligations and duties of kinship, ethnicity and a common culture take priority. Certainly, Wener, (2003) acknowledges that we are psychologically and socially more likely to attend to proximate duties, where we can more easily assess the needs and the efficacy of our contribution, rather than with distant others where the parameters of the exchange calculation are less well defined.

In Summary:

The moral thesis P2 prioritises national over global obligations. Rawls theorises that well-ordered nations can manage national and mutual global justice for all citizens without the need for supra-national bodies which are doomed to fail. Wener argues a parochial empirical thesis that we are best suited to attend to the needs of our compatriots.

Special and general obligations:

According to Goodin, R., E (1988, pp.265) the limits of our obligations may be grounded in our relationships, we are social animals with important special obligations and duties to kith and kin and compatriots. Our culture has at the same developed philosophical ideals that treats humanity as a homogeneous whole with general humanitarian obligations unconstrained by family, nationality, ethnicity or other personal relationships. Moral philosophy has long been universal and impartial in outlook, but this does not take account of reciprocal special relationships and duties, of 'kindnesses', 'sacrifices' and 'services', that are demanded by our common-sense morality. As citizens we fulfil our

⁹ After Kant, see Rawls, (1993, footnote 12)

obligations to the state in the expectation that state has mutual obligations towards us should we become unable to provide for ourselves. It is here that the dichotomy between general and special obligations falls away, [Goodin, \(1998,pp.270,73\)](#), special duties are no more than an entailment of general duties,

Given the plethora of moral injunctions and psychological determinants for special and general obligations, [Miller, \(1995,pp.55,6\)](#) calls for a set of principles based on a philosophical 'system such as Utilitarianism', Human Rights or 'some system of equality ', viz., an ethical system on which to base a theory of justice. Principles where helping ones nearest and dearest does not exclude a duty to help all and conversely where my humanitarian do not violate my obligations to particular individuals and groups.

Our particular relationships are 'vitaly important' and have always been part of particularist ethics, for [Hume](#) morality is relational¹⁰. Universal ethics call for reason, impartiality, consistent decisions and universal application. Particularist ethics is based on a concern for oneself and close others, why should I set aside my friends and family, existing commitments and allegiances in favour of others, while universal ethics requires rationality and impartiality, qualities lacking in many, that will undermine my personal ethics. [Miller](#) pragmatically asserts that particular ethics are a sufficient response to our obligations for distributive justice, grounded in our understanding of human nature.

[Sheffler, \(2002,pp48,9\)](#) recognises the problems of 'common sense morality' where special obligations associated with relationships disadvantage those outside the relationship group. Special obligations come first, but there are other than associative duties that jump the queue, contractual, reparative duties and gratitude also come first. This may be exacerbated by current global trends: while integration of economies and technologies drive cosmopolitanism, disintegration is just as likely, the breakup of former USSR, the rise of nationalism in Eastern Europe, cessation in Spain, Brexit, all drive special relationships and obligations.

Do special obligations 'provide the better-off with moral justification' for giving to close compatriots? They come first and result in an unfair distribution of justice, however counter arguments claim they are an added burden and need not negate our general duties, [Sheffler,\(2002,pp.86,8\)](#).

In Summary:

Special obligations require they are served first. When trying to serve both masters, 'it is implausible that general humanitarian obligations will remain untouched', *ceteris paribus*, however an unfair distribution of justice does not negate our special obligations nor vice versa, the dilemma remains, both must continue to inhabit the same ethical space.

Overall Summary and Conclusion: Both Singer's imperative to 'save the drowning child' and Rawls' 'realistic utopia' ground the same normative moral premise of global justice for all, and both facilitate the obligations of individual citizens, alone or in concert, to honour human rights.

¹⁰ Hume cited by [Miller, 1995,pp.58,footnote-11](#)

Cosmopolitanism proposes citizens have a humanitarian obligation to promote general global justice which takes precedence over any special obligations resulting from personal relationships with particular others, kith and kin, compatriots etc. This is finessed by Goodin and Miller who call for the co-existence of both special and general ethical behaviours, a 'common-sense morality', that underpins liberal society.

There is little to choose between the two approaches. Should we opt for the impartial moral premise or is ethical behaviour to proximate and distant others sufficient? Each promote laudable normative behaviours towards the global poor.

Given this dilemma which empirical theses can best serve our obligations of individual citizens to the global poor.

The empirical thesis of cosmopolitanism requires our individual obligations to be exercised through global and federal bodies, however these same supra-national bodies are heavily criticised by Pogge for perpetuating global injustice and by Wener for their inefficiency. Liberal Nationalism, takes a principled stance on citizens obligations towards proximate and distant others, but by its democratic nature the citizen's individual humanitarian commitment is de-coupled from implementation by the intervention of the state apparatus.

Pogge's model of direct action by citizens, albeit in academia, resolves the problem with large bodies, and highlights the alternative of direct action, which must include NGO's, albeit they have their own problems with transparency.

Therefore, In the absence of reform of supra-national organisations and further integrationist ambitions by liberal nations, then direct action is least limiting of our individual obligations. Pogge indicates two fronts for action, direct lobbying of influential bodies and ensuring our voices are actioned by our democratic representatives in requiring accountability and transparency from global bodies. We can require the equivalent same of NGO's.

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