

Philosophical Remarks on Global Justice and Poverty

Julian Culp (Goethe University of Frankfurt)

1. Introduction

I would like to start out by thanking Dr. Klaus Schäfer for the kind introduction as well as Dr. Christoph Schöler for the invitation to participate in this consultation of the Evangelical-Lutheran Churches here at the Christian Jensen Kolleg in Breklum. I am extremely honored to be able share my thoughts on global justice and poverty with you as well as to be able to enter into a conversation with Bishop Dr. Alex Malasusa.

The theme that has been selected for this plenary session is “*He has anointed me to tell the good news to the poor.*” Of course the core meaning of this passage is a theological one. But I will not even try to explore this theological meaning. Instead I will offer a couple of philosophical remarks on this passage from the point of view of, broadly speaking, liberal theories of global justice and human development that all accept the equal moral value of all human beings.

More specifically, I would like to address three sets of questions. Firstly, *What kind of obligations do rich governments and rich individuals owe to the poor?* In other words, *What is the nature of the obligation to help the poor? Do rich individuals and states owe the poor justice or rather humanitarian aid?* The next set of question that I will respond to is *Who counts as poor?* and, in particular, *Are the poor primarily those who lack certain resources like income and wealth – or are they rather those who lack certain capabilities or freedoms such as the capability or freedom to run for a political office?* Finally, I will also try to shed light on the question, although very tentatively so, *In which ways can churches promote justice and alleviate poverty?*

2. What is the Nature of the Obligation of Rich Governments and Individuals to Help the Poor?

The distinct answers to the question *What is the nature of the obligation of rich governments and individuals to help the poor?* divide the academic philosophical thinking about global justice into two camps: the nationalists on the one hand, and the cosmopolitans on the other.

The so-called nationalist theorists draw a bright line between the poor who are co-nationals and the global poor who belong to other nations. On the basis of this differentiation the nationalists point out that while there are relatively strong obligations of justice to care for co-nationals, there are only relatively weak humanitarian obligations when it comes to caring for the global poor who live abroad. Accordingly, while national distributive justice may ask co-nationals to endure considerable burdens such as paying a large amount of taxes in order to ameliorate the position of the national poor, international humanitarian obligations towards the global poor require only small sacrifices, such as minor donations to charitable organizations.

In response to this nationalist way of thinking, however, several so-called cosmopolitan theorists have asked what could possibly justify restricting considerations of justice to the domain of the nation. These cosmopolitan thinkers point out that under conditions of globalization our individual actions and political institutions do not solely impact or affect those who live within the borders of our nations. In other words, as a matter of empirical fact, it is clear that under conditions of globalization several individuals and collective decisions have a pervasive impact across national borders. These decisions include for example the regulation of the use of nuclear energy and fossil fuels as well as rules concerning taxation and health policy. Because of the border crossing impact of these regulations, cosmopolitans hold that duties of justice towards the poor apply globally and not just domestically.

Several of the nationalist thinkers have objected to this line of argument and have stated that there is nevertheless something normatively peculiar about the national context. While members of each nation share a distinctive culture that can justify strong obligations of justice towards co-nationals, there is no similar kind of global culture by reference to which principles of justice could be justified. Because of this common national culture and the absence of a similar kind of global culture, nationalists argue that obligations of justice towards the poor apply only within nations, but not across nations.

Hence when it comes to helping the global poor who live in other nations, the nationalists argue that this is simply a matter of charity or humanitarian aid, but not a matter of justice. This is to say that one may donate voluntarily money to the global poor, or one may be required to aid the global poor so as long as this comes only at small cost to oneself. Yet since justice applies only among co-nationals, helping the global poor cannot at all be viewed as a requirement of justice, which would justify asking people to do much more for the global poor than that what is achievable at small costs.

There appears to be an impasse, then, in the academic philosophical debate between the nationalists who argue that duties of justice to the poor apply only among co-nationals and the cosmopolitans who argue that such duties of justice apply globally among all persons. More recently, however, an increasing number of political philosophers have taken up a middle ground in this debate between the nationalists and the cosmopolitans. The so-called internationalists argue that while duties of justice apply both within as well as across national borders, the content of such duties of justice differs in these two cases.

These internationalists argue that while the achievement of a minimal level of well-being is owed towards all people globally, an egalitarian distribution of goods is owed solely domestically, that is, solely among co-nationals. Thus such internationalists accept that people may be asked to endure considerable burdens in order to help the global poor living abroad so that they enjoy at least a minimal level of well being. After all, the internationalists view the realization of such a minimal threshold as a strict obligation of justice rather than as a weak humanitarian duty or an optional act of charity.

However, what is owed to the poor globally is nevertheless different from that which is owed to the poor nationally. Whereas nationally a certain form of equality – equality of opportunity or equality of income and wealth, for example – should be achieved, globally it is enough when all people enjoy a minimal level of well-being even if they continue to remain unequal from a global perspective in terms of their opportunities or other goods like income and wealth. In this way the internationalists occupy an attractive middle ground between the nationalists who argue that the global poor do not have any demand of justice, and the cosmopolitans who argue that all people globally, including the global poor, are entitled to enjoy an equal amount of certain goods. So “Equality at home and sufficiency abroad” is the slogan of the internationalists, while the cosmopolitan argue for “global equality” and the nationalists defend only “national equality”.

3. Who Should Count as Poor?

Which particular kind of lack or deficiency should be viewed as characteristic of “the poor”? Following a common understanding the poor are those who lack financial resources such as income and wealth. The World Bank, for example, endorses such an understanding of poverty when it states that those who possess less than 1.25 dollars a day count as extremely poor and those who possess less than 2 dollars a day count as poor.

It is controversial, however, to assume that we should understand poverty primarily in such monetary terms. There are many other ways in which one may understand poverty. The point is that at an abstract level the term “poverty” simply means “a lack” or “a deficit” of something, but does not specify of what exactly such a lack or deficit actually consists.

Capability theorists such as Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, for example, argue that we should make comparisons of well-being and human development by reference to what they call “capabilities”. By “capabilities” they mean the effective or real freedoms that people have to engage in certain activities such as walking or praying as well as the effective or real freedoms that people have to enjoy certain states of affairs such as being healthy or well-nourished.

According to such a capabilities approach, those who are poor do not suffer from a lack of resources like income and wealth, but instead suffer from having to choose from a very restricted set of capabilities or freedoms. Thus following this way of understanding poverty, to provide just two examples, the poor may be those who are unable to choose to work or those who are unable to vote.

This capabilities approach allows even for the possibility that those who are rich in economic terms – because they earn high salaries or possess wealth – may nevertheless be poor in terms of their capabilities. They may be economically rich but fail to enjoy the political freedom to vote because of their religious belief, or unable to work in the profession in which they would like to because of their gender. In these ways the capabilities approach focuses on *what people are able to do and be* rather than on how many goods people possess. This approach reminds us that we always need to question all narrow definitions of poverty, because there are multiple ways in which people may be understood to be lacking something.

4. The Contribution of the Churches for Greater Justice

Let me now move on to consider also a more practical question, to wit, In which ways can the churches promote justice and alleviate poverty?

First of all, churches *can* be of great instrumental use and help discharge obligations that rich individuals possess vis-à-vis the poor, whether these are strict obligations of justice or weak demands of humanitarian aid. Because the churches represent a well-connected transnational network, churches can function as trustworthy and reliable partners for helping the poor. In

particular the churches' local expertise can be of crucial importance because they can thereby avoid those kinds of aid that are either ineffective or even parochial, which often occur when donors lack a proper understanding of the social and political context in which they interfere.

Second, through their common faith the churches share a common religious and spiritual culture that may provide an alternative foundation for accepting certain obligations of justice vis-à-vis the global poor. In other words, in response to the nationalist thinkers that hold that strong obligations of justice apply only among co-nationals because only co-nationals share a common national culture, church members may respond that they share a common religious and spiritual culture and that – at least for them – this culture is a valid source of obligations of justice. Hence the church members are able to break up an exclusively nations-centered perspective and can emphasize that despite national boundaries people from different nations share many important things in common, and that such a commonality may very well constitute the basis for accepting certain obligations of justice.

Finally, the churches can nourish the hope that, although the world appears to be extremely unjust because so many people suffer from various kinds of poverty, the possibility exists that one day the worst forms of injustices will disappear. In this way the churches can help avoiding cynicism and create the motivational and psychological conditions necessary for engaging in the struggle to achieve greater justice.

5. Conclusion

I will close by summarizing my responses to the questions about global justice, poverty and the role of the churches that I posed at the beginning. I began by clarifying that there are competing understandings of the nature of the obligations of rich individuals and governments to help the global poor. These conceptions are based on different conceptions of global justice: the nationalist conception which denies the validity of any claim of justice beyond the state; the cosmopolitan conception which strives to realize a certain form of equality globally; and the internationalist conception which demands “equality at home and sufficiency abroad”. Following that I explained further that there is also a variety of understandings of poverty. Not only those who lack material resources but also those who lack certain capabilities or freedoms may be viewed as poor. Finally, I suggested that the churches might play an important role for achieving justice and alleviating poverty. They possess a wealth of local expertise and can thereby be effective instruments in the fight against poverty; they might also

be able to offer alternative sources for recognizing obligations of justice; and they can instill in people the hope that their fight for greater justice is meaningful and not in vain.

Thank you for your attention.

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