
Global Justice

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Introduction

For long, the discipline of political theory and that of international relations (IR) had little to do with each other. Despite the claims of political theorists that the principles of liberalism are universal in scope, theorists tended to analyse and prescribe for nationally bounded sovereign states. And IR theory, till recently, was similarly preoccupied with sovereign nation-states as the primary units of the international system. In the last decade or so, liberal theorists largely based in the west have gone global. This has largely to do with the realization that in an interconnected globalized world, both the problems and the solutions to these problems have to be global. But it also has to do with the general concern about:

1. poverty in the three continents of Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and South America, and
2. the huge inequalities between countries of the west and countries of the developing world.

For instance, Article 25, clause I of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that:

everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care, and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness-disability-widowhood, old age or circumstances beyond his control.

In September 2000 the UN General Assembly adopted a declaration that committed governments to free the world from extreme poverty. Yet, not only does extreme poverty continue to plague the lives of millions of people living in the developing

world, huge inequalities mark the developed and the developing world. The Human Development Report (HDR) 2007–2008 estimates that one billion people live on less than US\$ 1 per day, and 2.6 billion people or 40 per cent of the world's population are on the margins of survival, i.e. on less than US\$ 2 per day. This segment of the global population commands less than 5 per cent of the world's income, whereas 20 per cent of the population, which mainly inhabits the affluent western world, controls two-thirds of the global income. The report reiterates that 28 per cent of children in the developing world are underweight and stunted, and 10 million children in this part of the world die before age five, from avoidable causes such as poverty and malnutrition (UNDP 2007: 25). More significantly, over 3.6 billion people in the world not only lack access to a steady income, they also lack access to shelter, nutritious food, health care, education and other basic preconditions of living a life that we recognize as distinctively human. More troublesome is the recognition that the adoption of discriminatory policies by the developed world has actually increased poverty in the developing countries. According to the 2003 HDR, even if governments of developing countries adopt appropriate national policies, and even if donor financing is increased, the Millennium Development Goals will not be achieved if non-traditional exports of these countries continue to be blocked, or if they lose value in the world markets because of rich country protectionism. Will Kymlicka has suggested that all plausible political theory is about treating people as equal and is, therefore, connected in some ways with inequalities (2002: 3–4). If the concern of political theorists is with inequality and equality, how can a responsible political theorist ignore inequalities between states, or indeed the presence of deep pockets of poverty in major parts of a globalized world?

Notably, a distinction has to be made between theories of international justice and theories of global justice. Theorists of international justice believe that inequalities between states should be confined to permissible levels. Therefore, as Miller advocates, governments of the richer countries should transfer some portion of their resources to the governments of the poor countries. This will enable the scaling down of inequalities (Miller 2007). Theorists of global justice argue, on the other hand, that it is not the state but human beings or persons that stand squarely at the centre of any theory of justice for the following reasons. One, the individual is the prime unit of moral concern. Thomas Pogge puts it this way 'every human being has a global stature as the ultimate unit of moral concern' (2002: 169). Two, no one should suffer for reasons outside their control, or for reasons that are morally arbitrary such as gender, class, race and nationality. Three, if persons do suffer from multiple ills of the human condition for entirely avoidable reasons, ordinary citizens who live in the richer countries have obligations of justice towards the global poor. These obligations may or may not be as strong as the obligations the affluent westerners owe their fellow citizens, but the principle that they have duties beyond borders is incontrovertible. The world view that best sums up this perspective is cosmopolitanism, or the idea that the scope of justice cannot be limited to members of particular type of groups, whether national or sub national.

The first part of this essay maps some of these positions and concentrates mainly on liberal egalitarian theories of global justice. In the succeeding section, I critically engage with these theories from the perspective of the developing world.

Mapping the Debate on Global Justice

In 1972, the philosopher Peter Singer published an influential essay on 'Famine, Affluence and Morality' in the reputed journal *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. The main features of his argument were as follows—One, Singer suggested that suffering and death from lack of food, shelter and medical care are simply bad. Two, if it is within the power of the citizens of the affluent west to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, they are morally obliged to do so. Three, it does not matter that people who suffer for avoidable reasons are distant or proximate, or whether they are fellow nationals or needy foreigners. The need of strangers is as morally compelling as the need of neighbours or fellow citizens. Four, it also does not matter that other people do or do not contribute their mite to the alleviation of poverty and misery; individuals should take on this moral responsibility. And five, donating to famine relief is not a matter of charity but that of duty.

In a later work titled *One World*, Singer argued that since the world is interlinked, we need a global ethic that is transborder. In chapter five, he contrasts the way in which the families of the victims of the 9/11 attack were compensated by American donors and the public, and the indifference shown to thousands of people who died in the developing world in the same period. In sum, Singer criticized the view that:

1. national boundaries are significant, and
2. it is worse to leave fellow citizens in need, than to leave someone from another country in that state (2002: 152).

Imagine, he suggests, that you walk along a pond and see a small child in danger of drowning. It would be morally wrong not to try to save the child, even if the suit you wear gets wet and is ruined. The cost is small compared to the good of saving the child. So how can the west be indifferent to deaths in the poor countries from hunger or disease? We can have special feelings for those we love or those who are close to us, but this need not prevent us from helping others. There is no great difference between compatriots and what we can call the distant needy. Therefore, the middle class American should give to the global poor something like one per cent of his or her annual income. Since international aid to the global poor is clearly inadequate, the transfer of this sum by ordinary citizens in the US to the global poor could help eradicate severe poverty. It follows that those who do not donate act immorally.

Basically, Singer focuses on agents making moral choices between spending on personal desires and helping the needy. Therefore, he does not address the larger scope of global political morality. However, political theory is not only concerned

with moral choices, but with the political contexts in which people make these choices—i.e., with political institutions and practices. None of us makes choices in a vacuum. Subsequent theories of global justice have focused on precisely these factors and these contexts. In the process, they have addressed the issue of *why* the richer world owes the global poor.

Realizing Universalism

One category of global justice theories seeks to realize the universalism of liberalism by conceptualizing the world as a single political unit. Simon Caney, for instance, suggests in his *Justice Beyond Borders* that given universal morality, there is no reason to defend civil and political rights of one's fellow citizens and not be concerned about the rights of other people, wherever they may live. This position is simply incoherent (Caney 2005: 77). Darrel Moellendorf similarly argues that if there are good reasons to support justice within the nation-state, these reasons also apply to supporting justice across the globe (2002: 28).