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"Global and Local Justice"

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I

Global justice would seem to require a global theory—a single philosophically grounded account of what justice is that explains why it ought to be realized in exactly this way, everywhere, right now. It requires a comprehensive story about the just society, about equality, luck, liberty, and much else, that need only be repeated again and again, for it applies in identical fashion to every country, even to every person, in the world and calls for a straightforward linear realization. But there are several well-known difficulties with this project. First, there is no one to tell the story to who can act authoritatively in its name. There is no global agent of justice. Nor is there a set of agents, whose legitimacy is widely recognized, who might take up the story in its one true version and collectively pursue the project it describes. The members of the UN Security Council are—unfortunately, perhaps, but also obviously—incapable of undertaking any such effort.

Second, we can't be sure that the story will be understood in the same way by all the people who hear it—or even that it will be understood at all in the way that the philosophical story-tellers intend. The story doesn't connect with a single common life whose interests and ideals might make it, first, comprehensible, and then appealing. There isn't a common life of that sort or, better, there are many common lives of different sorts. The diversity of cultures and the plurality of states make it unlikely that a single account of justice could ever be persuasive across the globe or enforceable in everyday practice. A global despot (if he was sufficiently enlightened) or a philosophical vanguard might manage the enforcement, but it is hard to see how their rule, even if it served the cause of justice, could itself be just.

And yet, the vast inequalities of wealth and power in the world today, and the resulting (accompanying?) poverty, malnutrition, and illness, cry out for a globally applicable critique. So does the extreme vulnerability of so many people to natural disaster and political violence—not only in the third world, but in the first and second too. And this necessary critique cannot endorse the idea that cultural difference makes a difference; it must insist on the simple wrongness of the human suffering that we currently live with and, mostly, accept. If we force ourselves to look, the picture is grim: extraordinary wealth and terrible poverty, the powerful few and the powerless many, tyrants and warlords and their desperate victims, transnational corporations and brutally oppressed workers, those who live in mansions and those who live in squalor, gourmet diners and scavengers for garbage. These polarities are frightening and, to my mind, obscene. But it is the people at their farther end whose living conditions and daily dying demand from us a single, coherent moral and political response. We don't actually need to agree on the wrongness of inequality, or on the moral significance of good or bad luck, or on a complete list of human rights, or on the persuasiveness of "Western" or "Asian" values, or on any full-scale theory of distributive justice in order to defend a global campaign against poverty, hunger, and disease, against mass murder and ethnic cleansing.

No doubt, each of these human disasters is partly, even significantly, the product of local causes and local agents, but all of them are also the products of an international economy increasingly marked by the flow of money, labor, and goods across political and cultural boundaries and of an international politics increasingly marked by the use of force and the transfer of military resources across those same boundaries. We will need to attend to what goes on within particular states, cultures, and religions, but we need

first to address the kind of suffering that has only a human face, and with regard to this suffering, global impact takes precedence over local difference.

So, how should we address the terrible injuries endured by the people at the wrong end of the global polarities? Since I am writing as a political theorist, the question that I mean to ask is: how should we address them morally and intellectually? How should we think about the urgent needs of the desperately poor and the desperately weak? Let's agree that we can't agree on a theory of global justice and that there isn't, right now, a globally effective agent who could put any such theory into practice—and "right now" is the absolutely necessary temporal rule. What we require instead to meet the needs of the hour is minimalist in character: the recognition of people like ourselves, sympathy with their pain, and a few widely shared moral principles. If these three amount to a theory, it is, so to speak, a "little" theory, one that is incomplete in much the same way that global society is incomplete: it can only do a few things, and it can only do them in a rough and ready way: its realization depends on the uncoordinated activities of many different agents. This minimalist account of justice-right-now has two aspects, which I will call humanitarian and political and examine in that order. What work will remain to be done once justice-right-now is realized (if it is ever realized), what kind of justice lies beyond our current urgencies, and how just institutions and practices might be developed and sustained—that requires a maximalist theory of a fairly complex sort, adapted to the reality of cultural and political difference. I will try to say something about those realities and something too about the actual pursuit of justice-over-the-long-run.

II

When we see human beings suffering, we feel a natural empathy with them, and we want to help--unless, Rousseau says in his Discourse on Inequality, we have been corrupted by philosophy. The American philosopher John Rawls, a powerful voice against corruption, claims that there is a natural duty to help people in trouble—a “duty of mutual aid.” He is right, I think, but this duty must have its root in fellow-feeling, in the pre-philosophical recognition of the “others” as people like us. It is this natural empathy that explains the outpouring of aid after a devastating flood or earthquake. The response comes from thousands of ordinary men and women acting through voluntary associations (NGOs), and it also comes from political communities (states) acting in the name of their citizens. But it starts from the feelings of individuals. How can these feelings generate a duty? It must be because one of the things we feel is that we ought to feel this way: we ought to want to help.

We think of floods and earthquakes as natural disasters, though we know that their effects are often aggravated by malevolent or negligent human agents. Similarly, many of the disasters of social life were once imagined as acts of nature, but these days we are (rightly) inclined look for direct or indirect human agency. In all these cases, whether the resultant suffering is naturally caused or man-made, it is right to respond in a humanitarian way, acting out of fellow feeling. But whenever human agency is involved, we are also required to follow the causal chain and try to identify the agents. We have to examine the history of malevolence or negligence and consider the responsibilities of all the men and women in the chain—including ourselves. And once we know the names of the agents,

natural duty may well be seconded by, or transformed into, political obligation.

But let's begin with humanitarianism and the natural duty to relieve human suffering. We don't do this very effectively since there is so much suffering; it has so many different causes; and there isn't a single, organized relief effort. Still, in particular cases, we ought to help as best we can, and these cases extend beyond singular events like floods and earthquakes, epidemics and massacres. They include general conditions like deep poverty, homelessness, endemic disease, and widespread, ongoing persecution and repression. I am going to focus mostly on poverty in this lecture because it is the poor who suffer the most from every other kind of disaster. Americans saw this very clearly when hurricane Katrina destroyed much of the city of New Orleans. It was the poorest residents who lived on the lowest ground, protected by the least looked-after levees, whose homes suffered the greatest damage. This is, as we all know, a common story. Disease kills first the weak and malnourished. Earthquake and fire are most deadly for those who live in jerry-built houses and tenements. Even a man-made disaster like ethnic cleansing, where the violence cuts across class lines, will impact most cruelly on people without the resources that make escape possible. We can take poverty as the primary condition of human suffering—the first humanitarian crisis, the first object of our natural duty to help.

Again, we ought to help for simple humanitarian reasons and, again, we don't need the guidance of a theory of justice—though other theories, about economic and political causation, would certainly help. And we will also need, as David Miller has argued, a theoretical account of the assignment of responsibility or, at least, of primary responsibility in a given case. But what ought to be done, concretely, practically, here and now, is

often far from obvious, even when we agree on who should do it. So we are bound to argue about that, try to work out the best remedial policy or, since we will disagree about which one is best, try to identify a set of possibly useful policies, and then press the appropriate agents to carry them out. Some of these agents will be NGOs, some will be attached to religious communities, some will be UN-sponsored, but the most effective agents in what is still a global society of states are the actually existing states. And that means that even our humanitarian efforts require political action; we have to press for the engagement of state officials and the expenditure of state money.

Because we think of these efforts as humanitarian, the duty to join them extends to all humankind. The duty of individuals, and of their associations, including their states, is relative only to their ability to help; it is a universal duty, and I think that we experience it that way. We may feel a deeper empathy or a greater urgency in the case of ethnic kin or fellow believers, and that connection, as Miller says, is one reason to assign (primary) responsibility for their rescue or relief. Still, the sight of human suffering, whoever the victims are, brings with it the sense of a duty to respond. Now I know that many people don't, in fact, feel this duty, but it is enough that those of us who do feel it (and we too are many) don't feel it only as individuals but as members of, and in a way on behalf of, humanity as a whole. So when we give money to Oxfam, or to Doctors Without Borders, or to Human Rights Watch, or when we ask the US government to send the navy to help the victims of a tsunami, we are simply doing what we ought to do. Exactly how much individual men and women are required to give of their time, energy, and money, I am not able to say; nor can I or anyone else instruct individuals about how to choose the distant disasters to

which they devote their resources (closeness makes things easier). The allocation of governmental resources also requires difficult choices. There are certainly arguments to be made (about relative urgency, say) for doing this rather than that, but we must not expect any definitive theoretical guidance. It is probably possible, though, and if it's possible then it is also necessary, to insist that individuals and states are not doing enough even if we cannot specify exactly how much they should be doing. Hence the effectiveness of Thomas Pogge's argument that it would take only a very small percentage of the GNP of the wealthiest countries to end global poverty. If that is true, then there is a strong argument for deploying those resources, whatever further or different deployments might be morally required.

Sometimes, in cases of man-made disasters like massacre or ethnic cleansing, or in the case of political famines (caused or sustained for reasons of state), the necessary response requires the use of force. We call this "humanitarian intervention," and like other forms of humanitarianism, it is a universal duty: the obligation to stop a massacre falls on anyone, that is, on any state or coalition of states, capable of acting effectively. Individuals are not capable in such cases, and NGOs sometimes provide relief for the wounded, as they did in Bosnia in the 1990s, in ways that actually facilitate the ongoing killing. State action of a forceful kind is required here; the goal is to stop the massacre and then to help install a non-murderous regime. Once again, the leaders of a military intervention don't require a theory of the best regime to guide their efforts; they too should be minimalists. Nor is military force necessary in most humanitarian crises, and certainly not in the crisis of poverty, where nonviolent responses, like the commitment of

resources and the mobilization of trained personnel, are the only ones likely to be useful.

III

Humanitarian responses should be the same whether the crisis is a natural disaster or the product of human action (or inaction). Our natural duty is to relieve or end the suffering, and this is everyone's natural duty. The relevant principle is: Whoever can, should. That's not a complete assignment of responsibility, but it is the necessary beginning. If we examine the suffering caused by human beings, however, we will be led to argue for more particular obligations. Much of the world's poverty and many of the attendant disasters of poverty are caused, for example, by predatory rulers, corrupt oligarchs, and brutal warlords. These are the agents of political plunder, economic disruption, civil war, and mass flight. They are not, however, the sole agents, for all of them are assisted or supported by more distant and less visible political and economic actors. States seeking reliable allies, offering to sell weapons and train police; corporations looking for cheap labor or hoping to avoid environmental and safety regulation; entrepreneurs bribing public officials and living beyond local law; banks eager to receive the plundered money—these too are agents of human disaster. And since some of these latter agents are acting on our behalf, defending our national security, say, or providing us with consumer goods at low prices or with spectacular (if sometimes risky) investment opportunities, their responsibility extends to us too. The relevant moral principle is as obvious (and as often ignored) as the principle of mutual aid: You must help to undo injuries to other people that you have helped to cause—whether the “help” consists in acting or failing to act.

There are so many examples of this sort of complicity in human disaster that it will seem arbitrary to choose just one. But one will serve to illustrate my argument. In his book, The Bottom Billion, Paul Collier describes some of the ways Western governments and corporations help to sustain the deep poverty of the worst-off people in the world. Consider, for example, the role of Western banks when poor countries experience revenue booms from oil or other mineral resources. Much of the money is siphoned off by local elites, often with the help of the extracting companies, and sent to banks in the West. What do the banks do then? “Basically,” writes Collier, “they keep quiet about it. Is this a necessary consequence of banking secrecy laws? No, it is not. If the money is suspected of having terrorist associations...we now require the banks to blow the whistle on it. But if it is stolen from the ordinary citizens of the bottom billion, well, that is just too bad.” Vast amounts of money have in fact been stolen—enough, if it were well spent, to make at least a dent in the deep poverty of the poorest countries.

I don’t suppose that we have a natural duty to work for the reform of the banking system. But this is probably obligatory work for people who live in the countries that the banks serve and who benefit from the service. Of course, the obligations of bank officials and state regulators are more substantial and easier to specify, while those of ordinary citizens are weaker and more diffuse—still, they have some claim on us. And there are likely to be many obligations of this sort: to oppose governmental assistance (when it is our government) to predatory regimes, to support political and economic reconstruction in countries devastated by civil wars that we instigated or in which we intervened, to change trade policies that discriminate against the agricultural produce or the industrial products of poor countries, to require

powerful transnational corporations based in our country to pay minimum wages, protect the environment, observe safety laws, and recognize independent unions when they operate in other countries—even if the governments of those other countries are too weak or corrupt to maintain a regulatory regime.

The list of things that need to be done could be much longer, and so, again, we will have to make difficult choices about where to direct our energies. But it is a feature of organizational life in liberal democracies that there are many agents at work on issues like these—political parties, social movements, labor unions, religious groups, NGOs of different sorts. And this is also a feature of global civil society, where organizations can raise money in democratic countries and then work, though not without risk for their workers, in countries ruled by tyrants or torn apart by warring gangs. So we can meet our political obligations in many different ways.

But, it might be argued, we are not in fact going to do this in sufficient numbers to succeed. Reparative justice as a political project is no less utopian than comprehensive global justice. For even if the resource transfers to which we are immediately obligated are smaller than those required by a comprehensive theory of justice, they are still too large ever to command wide support among the self-interested citizens of the richer countries. That may be so, but I suspect that the transfers are actually much smaller than a comprehensive theory (the difference principle, for example) would require. And, what is equally important, they follow from principles of mutual aid and political responsibility that are widely accepted even when the required transfers are resisted. So there are political battles that can be fought here and that can be won or partly won--and the cause of justice-right-now can be incrementally advanced. Well then, can't comprehensive justice also be

incrementally advanced by doing exactly the same things? The defeat of predatory rulers, the reconstruction of devastated countries, the reform of the banks, fair trade, and the regulation of transnational corporations—wouldn't all this also be required by any theory of comprehensive justice? But if "all this" is achieved by many states and NGOs, working independently, here and there, more or less successfully, then it may not in fact advance a comprehensive scheme, and the very success of justice-right-now may make comprehensiveness more difficult.

This last point needs further explanation. One of the goals of justice-right-now, in both its humanitarian and political aspects, is to provide people around the globe with sufficient resources so that they can act on their own behalf. Immediate relief after a devastating flood, for example, should make it possible for people not only to resume a more or less "normal" life but also to work with water engineers and state officials to prevent future floods. When we force banks to give up the plundered money of tyrants and warlords, we are hoping for the emergence of states that can invest the money in education and development. When we argue for fair trade, we are aiming at the creation of local economies capable of providing jobs and security. When we support political reconstruction after civil wars and massacres, we are trying to create regimes ready and able to protect the lives of all their citizens. The natural duty and the political obligation to aid disaster victims have this necessary corollary: that we should not deal with disasters in ways that make it likely that we will have to deal with them again and again. We help people so as to make it possible for them to help themselves.

And the crucial agent of self-help in the world as we know it is a state of their own—I mean, a decent state, in their control, acting on their behalf,

defending their rights and interests. It might be a good thing if there were international agencies that scrutinized, reported on, and regulated the activities of states, but no such agencies exist today. The UN sometimes claims this role, but no political leader would entrust the safety of his people to the actually existing UN. NGOs like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International provide scrutiny and reporting, but they have no regulatory powers. Justice-right-now works, and only works, in and through the semi-sovereign states of the global order. But the success of these states in maintaining peace and security, preventing flood and famine, providing education and welfare, planning economic development, and policing foreign investors, while it would make the world more just, would not necessarily advance the cause of global justice if this is conceived in terms of a single comprehensive theory. This is so for two reasons. First of all, people living in the countries that had contributed significant resources to relief and repair, and hence to the success I have just described, might well feel that they were now entitled to focus on the problems of their own society—given that everyone else was able to do that too, though still with unequal resources. And second, that local focus would not produce anything like convergence on a single, uniform system of distributive justice.

IV

How then should we think about justice-over-the-long-run? Relief and repair will create a world considerably more egalitarian than the world as it is today. Beyond that, I don't think that we need to insist on universal and absolute equality. If men and women everywhere were protected from the common disasters of nature and social life, if the predatory versions of politics and economics were under control, it seems to me that we could let

cultural difference, political struggle, and economic competition work their ways and produce... whatever they produce.

I don't mean that "whatever they produce" will be all right or good enough or even good at all. We will still require strenuous social criticism and, even more important, repeatedly renewed political struggle. But these will now be local in character and reiterative across the globe. In a famous line, the Bible tells us, "Justice, justice shalt thou pursue." But the relevant "thou," once we have achieved economic sufficiency and political decency, is not humanity as a whole but rather the plurality of human communities. Let there be many pursuits. Let a hundred flowers bloom. It is entirely appropriate (a tribute to human creativity?) that communities, cultures, and religions should have different ideas about the relative value of different social goods and also about the distributive criteria appropriate to each. Of course, there will be different priorities and different understandings even within the same community, the same culture or religion: difference and disagreement are universal features of human life. But there are common fields of reference, common histories and literatures, common commitments to a shared future, which give a particular shape to our disagreements. And these commonalities tend to be produced and reproduced within political communities, through highly differentiated cultural and religious institutions. When the commonalities extend across political boundaries, as they apparently do in the case of the European Union, then the pursuit of justice should be extended in the same way. If they were ever to extend across the globe, we would need only a single pursuit of a uniform and comprehensive justice. But regional extension is rare in the world today, and global extension is non-existent. We see faint signs of its emergence with regard to some social goods—as in the universal lip service paid these days to the

democratic distribution of political power. But lip service is far short of commitment, and global understandings of many other social goods are remarkable in their divergence.

Mutual aid in time of crisis and political responsibility for injuries-across-borders are the two necessary aspects of global justice--which is and ought to be a response to urgent need, to the suffering of the worst-off, the victims of natural disaster and human depredation, the poor and the powerless. Its time constraint is: right now. But the long-term distribution of social goods among people who have been freed from the urgencies of poverty and powerlessness—that should be their own work; that is local justice. And for that there is no time constraint; the work goes on and on. At any given moment, we are simply engaged.

What I am proposing here is that we think about local distributive justice in much the same way as we think about self-determination and the politics of liberation. Each collective self must determine itself by itself. The process is reiterative. Some selves may imitate earlier determinations, or they may choose to determine themselves by way of contrast. But they must do it, whatever they do, by themselves. Similarly as the old left maxim has it, “the liberation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself.” Maybe the workers will follow in the footsteps of the bourgeoisie; maybe not. And, again, national liberation must be the work of each oppressed or subordinate nation. Even when the project receives support from around the world, from dissident citizens, say, of the oppressor states, no-one wants those external supporters to determine what liberation means for this nation—only its own people can (rightly) do that. And similarly again, the distribution of social goods must be decided by the men and women who make and value and distribute the goods. They must figure out

for themselves what justice requires. Can they get it wrong? Well, “they” is ambiguous here. Some of them can certainly get it wrong; many of them can get it wrong; but I doubt that all of them can get it wrong.

How can they get it wrong? Two ways are centrally important. The first failure of local justice occurs when the shared understandings on which distribution is based are not in fact as widely shared as local elites pretend. They defend slavery, for example, by claiming that the slaves accept their condition and love their masters; slavery is a “traditional” institution. They defend the subordination of women by claiming that women are themselves committed to the prevailing gender ideology and to the distribution of public work, wages, and respect that follow from it. I suppose that there are individual slaves and women who fit these descriptions, but not many. In a world of radically unequal power, however, the forms of denial and resistance may be devious, hidden, almost invisible. Because resistance is so hard to recognize, some leftist critics of local distributions repeat the claims of the elites, though they assign a different significance to them. They argue that oppressed men and women don’t know that they are oppressed because they have been taken in by the ideologies of their oppressors; they are the victims of false consciousness. By contrast, these critics have a true understanding of the oppression, they hold “the correct ideological position,” and they know the necessary political response. They are often right, I think, about the existence of injustice and the need for a political response. But they commonly misjudge the men and women on whose behalf they claim to be speaking, and they commonly fail to grasp the kind of response that these people need to make if justice is to be their own work. The theory of false consciousness points toward a vanguard politics, which is likely to lead in turn to a distorted distribution of political power.

It has to be said again: the work of liberation must be the work of the men and women who need to be liberated--and so should the definition of liberation be their own. Other people can help them—they will often need help—but it must not be the others who determine their future. Other people can criticize their work and urge them to adopt a different view of a liberated life, but this must be criticism only; it must never turn into domination. There is no single authoritative account of how a liberation struggle should go or of what a liberated life looks like.

The second failure of local justice occurs when one much valued social good is used to usurp other goods without regard to the meaning of those others. So state power in the former Soviet Union dominated the distribution of education, medical care, and housing. Or, Communist party membership, which ostensibly was an indication only of ideological commitment and political work, served as a necessary and sufficient criterion for professional advancement. Similarly, in many Western countries, market success and the accumulation of money dominate the distribution of social goods that are ostensibly not for sale—including political office and criminal justice. In the Islamic republic of Iran, religious commitments that are said to bring eternal life also bring political power and legal authority in this life. These distortions of distributive justice can only be resisted by people with an interest in and an understanding of the usurped goods. So: teachers and students defend the autonomy of the schools, doctors, nurses, and patients insist on the integrity of medical practice; believers argue for the independence of religious institutions from state control, ordinary citizens argue for the independence of state institutions from religious control; citizens again call for a welfare system whose fairness they can recognize and whose priorities they accept or for an

electoral system in which their votes count. These are the everyday battles through which justice is pursued, and they are necessarily fought by particular people in particular times and places; they are local battles. We watch how they go in other countries and learn from the others, or not.

In these local battles, the state is both an object and an instrument. It is an object in that we argue about how political power and office are rightly distributed; these two are social goods like any others. But the state is also an instrument of distribution, providing welfare, guaranteeing impartial justice and free elections, determining what money can and cannot buy and what limits should be set to the influence of powerful men and women. Imagine that these instrumental uses of state power are democratically determined. They will then be shaped,(and reshaped) by popular opinion, by the local version of common sense and conventional belief, by historical memory, and by ideological debate. The distributions that result may be legitimate even if they are wrong. And even if they are both legitimate and right (all social goods are distributed in accordance with their meaning to the men and women who make and distribute them), the results will never be final. Difference and disagreement will work their way, and the distributive arguments will be renewed again and again.

Relief and repair, the primary forms of global justice, are also never finished, but we can imagine at least a rough agreement on the principles that guide them. And we can imagine a world in which all the existing states are capable of self-help, so that mutual aid and reparative justice are only intermittently and occasionally required—and forthcoming whenever they are required. I say that the imagining is easy, but obviously we are still very far from that world, very far from the global justice that people need right now. At the same time, men and women who are free from the urgencies of

poverty and powerlessness are already engaged in the pursuit of local justice and in the unending arguments about social goods and values that it requires. One way of expressing the political project that I am advocating in this lecture is to say that everyone should have the justice they need right now so that they are able to pursue the justice that they will never finally have.