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A Global Difference Principle: Rawls and Beitz on Global Economic Inequality

The question of the justness of global economic inequality is largely a question of the demands of global distributive justice (if there is such a thing). In this essay, I will survey the views of Rawls and Beitz on whether Rawls' domestic difference principle can be extended internationally. I will then respond to Rawls that even if the difference principle is a liberal conception and thus cannot be accepted internationally, it warrants application by liberal states regardless of contractarian reciprocity. I will use the term "contractarian reciprocity" to denote the two-way responsibility that members of a contractual agreement expect upon their agreement.

1. Rawls' Domestic Difference Principle

In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls lays forth his domestic difference principle, the consequence of his social contract inspired thought-experiment. He conceives of members of a shared cooperative scheme stepping into an original position, from which they develop principles to fairly govern their interactions (Rawls, "Theory of Justice", 11-12). To Rawls, "members of a shared cooperative scheme" means members of one particular society, who have gathered to create principles for their affairs with one another ("Theory of Justice" 11). The original position's ability to create fairness is rendered by the veil of ignorance, i.e. ignorance of social placement and psychological propensities, which gives them a symmetrical relationship to the distribution of goods in their society (Rawls, "Theory of Justice" 11-12). Members in this original position choose two principles by which they will shape their legislature to form or reform their major social institutions (Rawls, "Theory of Justice" 13). The first of these is the principle of equal rights and duties (Rawls, "Theory of Justice" 14). The second is the difference principle, which states that social and economic inequalities are justified only if they serve the least advantaged of society (Rawls, "Theory of Justice" 14-15). This is a principle of distributive justice that seeks to redistribute societal goods to serve the good of all citizens as much as it is possible to do so. The weight behind these principles is that they help us to distribute goods so as to rectify the morally arbitrary natural endowments and social contingencies which typically

determine the distribution of goods in society (Rawls, “Theory of Justice” 15). This radical view of domestic economic justice renders domestic inequality immoral unless it is re-distributed to serve the least well off within a society. But what about the international community?

2. Beitz’s Argument

Beitz argues that Rawls’ difference principle of distributive justice applies internationally given modern international social cooperation. He points out that Rawls’ (first) original position errantly equates members of a shared scheme of social cooperation with a domestic state, assuming national political and economic self-sufficiency (Beitz, 373). Beitz argues that this assumption is unwarranted given the fact that the world has become increasingly economically interconnected due to the removal restrictions on international trade and investment, and thus, there is an extant global scheme of social cooperation (374, 388). Beitz argues that national boundaries have no fundamental moral significance due to the modern rise in economic interdependence (376). In my view, this is a strength in his argument, as national membership appears to be at least equally arbitrary as the contingencies of social placement and psychological propensities which Rawls sought to address domestically. The consequence of the moral weightlessness of national boundaries is that the (first) original position should include members of all nations, putting national citizenship also behind the veil of ignorance (Beitz, 388). Analogous to Rawls’ domestic original position, Beitz argues that members of the international community in the original position would choose to apply the same two domestic principles — equal rights and duties and the difference principle — internationally (376). This international extension of Rawls’ domestic principles renders a radical view: the justness of global economic inequality should be assessed according to the difference principle, requiring its redistribution internationally so as to benefit the least well off in the world.

3. Rawls’ Reply

In the *Law of Peoples*, Rawls disavows Beitz’s international extension of his domestic principles. He argues that the difference principle cannot apply internationally since it is founded on markedly liberal principles; thus he posits a more restricted view of international responsibility. Rawls argues that the difference principle cannot be extended internationally since it is built upon liberal principles of the person that not all countries agree upon (“Law of

Peoples” 63). That is, the first original position rests upon “a political conception of the person rooted in the public culture of a liberal society”, such as the equality, rational agency, and freedom of every individual, that not all societies endorse (Rawls, “Law of Peoples” 54). Consequently, he conceives of the need for a second original position which features representatives of various peoples rather than individuals, this circumvents the assumption of the equality and rationality of every individual within a society, and therefore better incorporates states with non-liberal views (Rawls, “Law of Peoples” 54, 55). In this second original position, peoples from liberal and illiberal societies would decide upon familiar international principles such as self-determination, self-defense, just war conditions, and the honouring of human rights (Rawls, “Law of Peoples” 46, 53). Principles of distributive justice are notably absent from this list as questions of distributive justice are relative to each people's political values (Rawls, “Law of Peoples” 53, 63). Rawls imagines international responsibility to be more minimal than Beitz, serving rectificatory purposes not based on principles of distributive justice (Rawls, “Law of Peoples” 63). That is, societies which have unfavourable conditions (material, political, cultural) for making a well-ordered society possible are to be assisted until they can maintain “decent political and social institutions” (Rawls, “Law of Peoples” 62-63). From this follows the international responsibility to ensure that basic human needs are met and that basic human rights are recognized (Rawls, “Law of Peoples” 63).

In sum, Rawls argues that Beitz’s extension of the difference principle internationally is presumptuous, not taking into account non-liberal views (“Law of Peoples” 63). He rather argues, employing the second original position, that nations should agree to assist each other economically only toward the end of making well-ordered societies possible, and this includes ensuring human rights are met and basic human needs are satisfied. Thus, in Rawl’s view, global economic inequality is considered an injustice which must be addressed only if it inhibits a country from having reasonably functional political and economic institutions. However, the meeting of basic human needs is an international responsibility.

4. Recap

Before responding to this I would like to recapitulate what has been discussed so far. Rawls argues that within a liberal domestic context there should be a difference principle of

distributive justice which renders economic inequality an injustice unless it is redistributed to benefit the whole society, especially the least well-off (Rawls, “Theory of Justice” 14-15). Beitz argues that since international affairs are increasingly interdependent, the international economy is a shared cooperative scheme, and thus, the first original position should incorporate individuals of every society, in which members would decide to apply the difference principle internationally (Beitz, 376). Rawls responds to this that the difference principle (or any other principle of distributive justice) cannot be extended internationally since it rests on a liberal conception of the individual that not all societies would agree upon (Rawls, “Law of Peoples” 63). He thus instead opts for a second original position in which representatives of all peoples would decide to assist one another in maintaining or creating decent political and economic societies (Rawls, “Law of Peoples” 63). I will now argue for Beitz’s conclusion, the international extension of Rawl’s domestic difference principle, from another angle.

5. Response

Even if the difference principle is based on a particularly liberal conception, its underlying value of not distributing deserts based on morally arbitrary factors should be held and enacted on principle by liberal states, not just on contractarian grounds which require reciprocal action within a cooperative scheme. Rawls is correct in pointing out that the acceptance of the difference principle requires the acceptance of the liberal conception of the fundamental equality of all persons (Rawls, “Law of Peoples” 63). And he is correct that this liberal foundation would be an obstacle for non-liberal nations to accept, and thus enact and reciprocate. However, regardless of this lack of contractual reciprocity, if the value which underlies the difference principle — not distributing goods on morally arbitrary grounds — is good on the domestic front for liberal nations, it is just as legitimate on the international one. This is because national birth is morally arbitrary: there is no moral reason (which liberal and secular peoples accept) as to why one person was born in one country and the next in another. Thus, national affiliation is not legitimate grounds to justify the withholding of economic goods from people in other nations. Consequently, to enact the difference principle domestically but not internationally would be unjustifiably asymmetrical, i.e. hypocritical, applying the principle in one instance and revoking it in another without legitimate reasons. I therefore conclude, along with Beitz, that the

difference principle should be enacted internationally, but instead of it necessitating an international reciprocal contract, it ought to be enacted in the unilateral redistribution of wealthy liberal nations to the least advantaged internationally. In short, if the difference principle binds liberal nations domestically, then it also binds them internationally. Thus, from the view of liberal nations, seen through Rawls's original position, global economic injustice is unjust unless their wealth is redistributed to serve the least advantaged around the globe.

I would like to here clarify what I mean by redistribution without contractual reciprocity. I certainly do not mean here that liberal nations have the right to coerce other nations to redistribute their goods, or that they have the right to give to individuals in other nations without their consent. Rather, I simply mean here that liberal countries must give their goods to the least advantaged in those countries *unilaterally*, regardless of if the nations they give to would ever reciprocate the favour if the difference principle suggested so.

At the heart of my argument is a reading of Rawls difference principle as a principled stand on moral arbitrariness and distribution, rather than founded on a contractual agreement. Many would object that the difference principle rests on this contractual basis, and thus could not be reasonably held otherwise. I demur. Though the difference principle is arrived at through the thought experiment of the first original position, its intuitive weight comes from a more fundamental impetus. That is, if we agree that it is morally wrong that goods are currently distributed upon morally arbitrary and socially contingent factors, and that this is an insult to the fundamental equality of all persons which ought to be redressed, then this principle can hold outside of any contractual agreement. This basic intuition is what gives the difference principle its moral traction in the first place.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, Rawls imagines the difference principle as the consequence of a fair agreement of rational and equal members in a domestic context. Beitz argues that due to growing international interdependence, this difference principle ought to be expanded internationally. Rawls disagrees by arguing that non-liberal nations would not accept this concept of distributive justice and that therefore no concept of distributive justice could be accepted in an international agreement, arguing for a more minimal conception of the international responsibility of liberal

states. I respond that, regardless of contractual agreement and reciprocity, if liberal states are convinced that the difference principle is crucial for just distribution domestically, then it is also crucial for just distribution on the international scale given the moral arbitrariness of national birth. The consequence of this argument is that, if the difference principle holds domestically for liberal nations, it also holds internationally, and thus they must redistribute their economic goods unilaterally to the disadvantaged across the globe.

Works Cited

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