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Global and Local Justice

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GLOBAL AND LOCAL JUSTICE

By Michael Walzer

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. It requires a comprehensive story about the just society, about equality, liberty, human rights, moral luck, and much else, a story that need only be repeated again and again, for it applies in identical fashion to every country in the world and also to the world as a whole. But there are several practical difficulties with this project. First, there is no one to whom we can tell the story, who can act authoritatively in its name. There is no global agent of justice whose legitimacy is widely recognized, who might take up the story in its true version and pursue the project it describes.

Second, we can't be sure that the story will be understood in the same way by all the people who hear it. The story won'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 (even if it were the single true account) could ever be persuasive across the globe or enforceable in everyday practice. A global despot 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 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. 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. 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 a complete list of human rights, 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 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 borders and of an international politics increasingly marked by the use of force and the transfer of military resources across those same borders. From our perspective, from the perspective of the wealthiest and most powerful countries, 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? 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 comprehensive account of what global justice would require and that there isn't right now a globally effective agent who could meet those requirements, even if we did agree about them—and "right now" is the absolutely necessary temporal rule. What we require instead is minimalist in character: the recognition of people like ourselves, concern for their suffering, 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.

This minimalist account of justice-right-now has two aspects, which I will call humanitarian and political; the two are not entirely distinct, but I will discuss them separately, in that order. What work would remain to be done if justice-right-now were ever realized, what kind of justice lies beyond our current urgencies—that requires a maximalist theory adapted to the realities of cultural and political difference. I will try to say something later on about those realities and about the 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. John Rawls claims that there is a natural duty to help people in trouble—a “duty of mutual aid.” He is right, I think, and this duty must have its root in fellow-feeling, in the pre-philosophical recognition of the “others” as people like us and of their troubles as troubles that might be ours. 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 and from political communities 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.

Floods and earthquakes are natural disasters, but 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 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. But whenever human agents are involved, we are also required to follow the causal chain, to examine the history of malevolence or negligence, and consider the responsibilities of all the men and women in the chain—including ourselves, if we find ourselves there. And once we know the names of the agents, natural duty will be transformed into political obligation.

But let's begin with the natural duty to relieve human suffering. We don't do this very effectively since there is so much suffering; it has so many causes; and there isn't a single, coordinated relief effort that we can simply join. 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 ongoing persecution. I will focus mostly on poverty 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, the 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 object of our natural duty to help.

Again, we ought to help for humanitarian reasons and, again, we don't need the guidance of a full-scale theory of justice. But we may need other theories, political theories or, at least, political knowledge, because what ought to be done, concretely, practically, here and now, is often far from obvious. Humanitarian aid in international society is not like dropping a coin in a beggar's cup. Delivered out of simple good will, without political forethought, it often has unintended and very harmful consequences—like bringing in new groups of predators who take their cut, and more, of the aid workers' beneficence. So we are bound to study the mixed record of success and failure, to argue about the best remedial 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 organs of the UN or international agencies like the IMF or the World Bank, but the most effective agents in what is still a global society of states are the actually existing states. And that means that our humanitarian efforts require not only political knowledge but also political action; we have to press for the engagement of state officials and the expenditure of state funds.

Because these are humanitarian efforts, the duty to join them extends to all humankind. The duty of individuals and associations is relative only to their ability to help; it is a universal duty, and I think that we experience it that way. The sight of human suffering, whoever the victims are, brings with it the sense of a duty to respond. I know that many people don't, in fact, acknowledge this duty, but it is enough that those of us who do acknowledge it (and we too are many) don't act 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 help the victims of a tsunami or to try to stop an ongoing massacre, we are simply doing what we ought to do, what everyone ought to do. Exactly how much individual men and women, or their governments, are required to give of their time, energy, and money, I am not able to say. Philosophical argument doesn't lend itself to

that kind of precision. Arguments can certainly be made (about relative urgency, for example) for doing this rather than that, but we must not expect any detailed theoretical guidance. It is probably possible, though, and if it's possible then it is also necessary, to insist that individuals and governments are not doing enough even if we cannot specify exactly how much they should be doing. Hence the effectiveness of the argument that Thomas Pogge has been making in a number of recent books and articles--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 other deployments might be morally required.

Sometimes, in cases of man-made disasters like massacre or ethnic cleansing, 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 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 facilitate the ongoing killing. State action of a forceful kind is required here; the goal is to stop the massacre and then help to 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.

Humanitarian aid is commonly discussed under the heading of philanthropy, but I think that is a mistake. Because it is obligatory, because it has to be massive, because it requires political agency, and because it can reach to the use of force—for all these reasons, humanitarianism in its global application is best understood as an aspect of justice. It includes charitable efforts and it is driven in the first instance by the feelings of individual men and women, but its scope, its organizational complexity, the policy debates it necessarily involves, and the fact that we can't give it up, make it the work of the just and not only of the good.

III

The humanitarian responses that I have been describing should be the same whether the crisis is a natural disaster or the product of human action (or inaction). The relevant principle is: Whoever can, should. But if we examine the suffering caused by human beings, 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 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 many of them are assisted or supported by more distant and less visible political and economic actors. States seeking compliant allies, corporations looking for cheap labor; entrepreneurs bribing public officials so as to avoid regulation; 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, 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 repair the injuries to other people that you have helped to cause—whether the “help” consists in acting in ways that you shouldn't act or failing to act in ways that you should.

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 reform 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 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 poor countries; to require 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 peoples' countries.

But, it might be argued, we are not in fact going to meet these obligations in sufficient numbers to succeed. Remedial or reparative justice as a political project is no less utopian than comprehensive global justice. Even if the resource transfers to which we are immediately obligated are smaller than those that would be required by a comprehensive theory, they are still too large to command wide support among the self-interested citizens of the richer countries. That may be so, but I suspect that the transfers are considerably smaller than a comprehensive theory or, better, the usual kind of comprehensive theory, would require. Equally important, the transfers (and all the other obligatory actions) follow from principles of mutual aid and political responsibility that are widely accepted even when their entailments are resisted. And, finally, we can identify responsible and capable agents and press them to act. So there are political battles here that can be fought and won or partly won--and the cause of justice-right-now can be incrementally advanced.

Well then, my critic might continue, can't comprehensive global 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? The answer is yes, of course, but if "all this" is achieved piecemeal, as it would be in the real world, 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 might make global 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 "normal" life, whatever that means in their circumstances, but also to work with water engineers and state officials to prevent future floods. If we forced banks to give up the

plundered money of tyrants and warlords, we would be 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. When we support political reconstruction after civil wars and massacres, we are trying to build states capable of protecting 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. Justice-right-now works, and only works, in and through the sovereign or semi-sovereign states of the global order. Non-governmental organizations can certainly help, but governments are necessary. This is a critical point, whose importance is often under-estimated. Statelessness and the anarchy and civil wars that engulf failed states are among the most important causes of human misery. What the least well-off people in the world today most need is the protection of a decent state. But the success of such states in maintaining peace and security, preventing flood and famine, providing education and welfare, promoting 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 comprehensive theory. The achievements of many different states, the product in each case of internal political struggles, would not lead to anything like convergence on a 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. That's a good thing, in my view, though it is defensible largely in negative terms, by reference to the terrible consequences of radical inequality. Beyond relief and repair, I don't think that we need to insist on anything like an absolute egalitarianism--equality, so to speak, across the board. If men and women everywhere were protected against the common disasters of nature and social life, if the predatory versions of politics and business 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 necessarily good at all. We will still require strenuous social criticism and 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 that different communities, cultures, and religions should have different ideas about the relative value of all the necessary and desirable 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: difference and disagreement are universal features of human life. But these latter differences have a particular shape and character, which are determined by a common history, a common language, a common set of institutions, and a commitment to a shared future. And commonalities of these kinds tend to be produced and reproduced within political communities—I mean, within states. When the commonalities extend beyond the borders of a single state, as they apparently do in the case of the European Union, 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 justice. But regional extension is rare in the world today, and global extension is non-existent.

Mutual aid in time of crisis and political responsibility for cross-border-injuries 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. 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. Remember the

old left maxim: “The liberation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself.” Similarly, national liberation must be the work of each oppressed or subordinate nation. Even when the project receives support from around the world, 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 invent, and produce, and value, and distribute the goods. They must figure out for themselves what justice requires. They must join in the everyday battles through which justice is pursued--which are necessarily fought by particular people in particular times and places. I think that I would argue that we have a right to this pursuit, though I cannot begin to do that here. Perhaps it is enough to say that if empathy grounds the principle of mutual aid, then respect grounds the principle that justice-over-the-long-run must be local.

In these local battles, the state is both an object and an instrument. It is an object in that we have to argue about how political power and office are rightly distributed; these are social goods like any others. If I believe that they should go to persuasive men and women who can win elections and to competent men and women who can pass civil service exams, I have to make the case for these distributive principles in front of my fellow citizens. As we may be learning in Iraq and Afghanistan, even if democracy and meritocracy are the universally right principles for the distribution of political power and office, they can’t be universally imposed. They must be worked out at the local level, and given the many particular histories of this “working out,” democracy and meritocracy will take different forms, and will be mixed in different ways, in different times and places. And all this is legitimate and right, even if this or that outcome doesn’t conform to the best theory of global justice. No outcome is the last outcome; the “working out” goes on and on.

At the same time, the state and all its offices and officeholders are also instruments of distribution, providing welfare, guaranteeing impartial justice, determining what money can and cannot buy, and what limits should be set on political and economic power. Imagine that these instrumental uses of state power are (more or less) democratically determined. They will then be shaped and reshaped by popular opinion, by the local version of common sense, by historical memory, ideological debate, and political campaigns. The distributions that result may be legitimate even if we think

they are wrong. And even if we think them right, the results will never be final. Difference and disagreement will work their way, and the distributive arguments will be renewed, as I've just said, 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 required or required only to a modest degree. I say that the imagining is easy, but obviously we are very far from that world, very far from the global justice that people need right now. At the same time, many men and women are already engaged in the pursuit of local justice and in the unending arguments about social goods that it requires. One way of describing the political project that I am advocating here is to say that everyone should have the justice they need right now so that they are able to pursue the justice they will never finally have.