Global Justice: From Responsibility to Rights

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Abstract

In the past decade, a growing number of authors, notably Thomas Pogge, have maintained that citizens in economically advanced societies are responsible for extreme and extensive poverty in the developing world. Iris Marion Young proposed the social connection model of responsibility, which asserts that these citizens participate in networks that give rise to global structural injustices. While Pogge’s argument for the existence of citizens’ responsibility has been the subject of widespread debate, few efforts have been made to scrutinise the solidity of Young’s perspective. To plug this gap in the literature, this paper assesses the pertinence of Young’s view.

A more traditional view than those of Pogge and Young considers poverty as indicating a lack of respect for the human rights of those living in less-developed countries. Rights theorists of global justice, however, have paid scant attention to philosophical observations concerning redistribution within the borders of a society. To remedy this shortcoming, this paper endeavours to develop the theory that citizens in affluent societies bear a duty correlative to the subsistence right of the global needy, by exploring sufficientarianism, which is one of the primary views on domestic redistribution.

To begin with, I make a distinction between the responsibility-based theory and the right-based theory of global justice. This is followed by a close examination of Young’s social connection model as a significant version of the former position. I then offer a right-based argument that invokes the sufficientarian idea of the human right to live above the threshold of safe and healthy subsistence.

Keywords: responsibility, social connection model, subsistence right, sufficientarianism, world poverty
1. Theories of Global Justice

During the past four decades, numerous studies on the ideal of global justice have sought to respond to worldwide problems, notably extreme and extensive poverty in the developing world. In his seminal essay, Peter Singer addresses the consequentialist principle that one has a moral duty to prevent something bad from occurring if it is in one’s power to do so without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.\(^1\) From this principle follows the claim that we ought to prevent famines from occurring abroad by making contributions to anti-poverty non-governmental organisations. Singer’s argument represents a consequentialist version of what may be called the principle-based theory.\(^2\)

A recent noticeable trend in the literature is the development of what I call the responsibility-based theory. Its central claim is that we—citizens in affluent societies—owe them—destitute people in less-developed countries—a moral duty, responsibility or liability because of the causal relationship between our acts or our government’s policy and their poverty. A prominent figure in this new trend is Thomas Pogge, who contends that the current schemes of international economy and politics systematically impoverish populations in developing countries.\(^3\) These schemes are instituted and implemented on the initiative of the governments of economically advanced societies, which seek to promote their citizens’ interests on their behalf. Based on these observations, Pogge concludes that we are all liable for violating a negative duty not to harm others, unless we take action towards institutional reforms of the world order.

Another responsibility-based thinker is Iris Marion Young.\(^4\) She argues that we take part in causal networks that bring about structural injustices such as homelessness within our own societies and the presence of sweatshop workers out of the borders. We all get involved in these networks by participating in a booming housing market or by purchasing commodities produced in sweat factories. To highlight the moral implications of our involvement in producing structural injustices, Young attempts to develop the social connection model of responsibility, according to which we are not to blame for our involvement but are required to participate in collective action.
If it were cogent, the social connection model would radically challenge our conventional perception of moral responsibility. Notwithstanding the significant implications it might have, Young’s view, unlike Pogge’s, has not been scrutinised. To fill this gap in the literature, this paper assesses the pertinence of her theory.

If a close look at Young’s responsibility-based view reveals its difficulties—as I argue below—then it seems worthwhile to explore some alternative. I advance what I call the right-based theory, which maintains that we owe the global needy duties correlative to their economic human rights. Rights theorists of justice beyond borders, however, have paid scant attention to philosophical observations concerning redistribution in a domestic setting. What seems particularly suitable for the right-based approach to world poverty is sufficientarianism. Sufficientarianism, which emerges from criticism of egalitarianism, argues that every member of a society should have enough to live above some reasonably defined threshold and that equality taken as the minimisation of difference between individuals plays no role above the threshold. By introducing sufficientarian concepts and ideas that are originally presented in relation to domestic redistribution into the context of global redistribution, I elaborate the right-based argument that we owe the global poor a duty correlative to their human right to the resources necessary to live above the threshold of subsistence.

2. Social Connection Model Examined

In this section, Young’s social connection model of responsibility is closely examined. To illustrate what she calls structural injustice, Young tells the imaginary story of Sandy, a single mother working as a sales clerk. Evicted from her apartment, Sandy looks for a better place but in vain, and she ultimately faces the prospect of homelessness. Structural injustice exists when social processes put some groups of people under systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities on the one hand, and enable others to dominate or to have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising their capacities on the other. Injustice of this kind occurs as a consequence of numerous individuals and institutions acting to pursue their own goals and interests mostly within the limits of rules and norms. Young develops a distinction, which she reads Hannah
Arendt as implying, between guilt attributable to persons who commit crimes and wrongs and responsibility assignable to ‘persons whose active or passive support for governments, institutions, and practices enables culprits to commit crimes or wrongs’. Structural injustice falls within the realm of responsibility, not that of moral guilt or financial liability.

As a paradigmatic example of global structural injustices, Young takes the case of sweatshop workers in less-developed countries. These workers, typically teenage girls, often work for ten to sixteen hours per day in a peak season, in an extremely hot room with insufficient lighting, excessive noise and blocked exit. Multiple factors allow such situations to arise and proliferate: lack of formal employment contracts, the disadvantaged position of female workers and job-hunters, inadequate systems of workplace-safety law and policy, government inaction on labour conditions, competitive international markets for garments and shoes in which price-reducing pressures usually function, big businesses that are indifferent to workers’ situations in relation to the commodities they sell and consumers in affluent societies who enthusiastically seek low-priced goods. By Young’s account, we are all involved in transnational processes that give rise to the health-threatening conditions of sweatshop labourers. She insists that we are not to blame but are required to participate in collective action to remedy structural injustices.

What one should note in assessing the robustness of Young’s argument is that she does not aim to offer a general solution for global poverty. Her discussion on sweat factories is meant to show that structural injustice frequently extends beyond national borders. If it were intended to provide such a solution, her discussion would suffer from its limited scope. For example, consider people with severe disabilities who are excluded from the labour market in a developing country: there seem to be no causal links between them and us similar to those existing in the case of sweatshop workers. Therefore, her argument could not cover the poverty faced by people with disabilities.

Keeping in mind that its scope would be limited if it were interpreted as a general prescription for world poverty, let us look closely at Young’s discussion on the social connection model. Imagine a fourteen-year-old girl, Sananda, who works in a
sweatshop in suburban Mumbai. Young would say that we owe Sananda the moral responsibility to participate in collective action to improve her situation.

Three mutually related questions can be raised here. The first is: Who are ‘we’? It is very likely, for instance, that Sandy regularly buys her children clothes produced in foreign sweatshops. Suppose that one day she bought her little daughter a T-shirt sewn by Sananda. Does Sandy then owe any responsibility to Sananda? Young notes that consumers with low incomes may be less able than those with high incomes to spend more on commodities that would help improve the conditions of sweatshop labourers. However, she never suggests that low-income consumers might be discharged of responsibility because of their financial limitations. This comprehensive attribution of responsibility seems objectionable for two reasons in particular. The first has to do with the recognisability of causal links. Sandy is presumably ill-educated; perhaps she does not read books or magazine articles on sweatshop workers in distant countries; she may have no friends or relatives who inform her about such topics. The second reason to question the blanket assignment of responsibility concerns the avoidability of results. After all, Sandy cannot help buying cheap goods produced through the process of exploitation of workers. Her children grow and continually need new clothes, but she cannot afford more expensive garments produced under fairer labour conditions. Because of Sandy’s limited recognisability and avoidability, the moral demandingness of Young’s position would encounter the same criticism that Singer’s view has long faced: every citizen is required to be a moral hero.

Young might respond to these objections by stressing that one has discretion in performing one’s responsibility. Her possible response leads to the second question: What act of responsibility should we do? Theoretically, Sandy has a great variety of options that might help, along with others’ acts, to improve Sananda’s working conditions: organising assemblies of the anti-sweatshop movement; distributing flyers in front of the Gap, Nike and Disney stores; complaining to these companies by making phone calls; persuading her colleagues to join the movement; and lamenting the situation of sweatshop labourers to her close friends and relatives, while continuing to buy the goods they produced. What is Sandy specifically supposed to do? On the one hand, it would be almost impossible for her to lead the
anti-sweatshop movement due to her limited recognisability and avoidability. On the other, it would be a tiny contribution for Sandy to lament the sweatshop workers’ situation without making any changes in her purchasing behaviour. Young does not provide any answer to—or even any clue for answering—the question of how each of us should choose a specific action.

The last question I want to pose is conceptual: What is the nature of the responsibility we allegedly owe to the global poor? Particularly relevant here is a distinction between what can be called guilt responsibility and what I call role responsibility. The sentence ‘the drunk driver was responsible for that car accident’ refers to the former type of responsibility, while ‘the doctor was responsible for ten patients’ mentions the latter. Guilt responsibility is backward-looking in the sense that it is assigned to a person or a group of persons whose past acts caused injury or damage. Responsibility of this type provides grounds for moral condemnation, financial reparation or legal punishment. By contrast, role responsibility is forward-looking in that it stems from an ongoing role that the agent voluntarily undertook or shoulders in a relevant social practice. It keeps obliging a person or a group to perform actions demanded by the role. Of course, if one does damage to another by neglecting one’s role responsibility, one bears guilt responsibility. Young’s notion of responsibility is an awkward mixture of these conceptually separate conceptions. It allegedly flows from citizens’ past (and present) acts of participating in the causal networks that give rise to structural injustice, but obliges the participants to take collective action without blaming them. This Janus-like notion of responsibility seems to be an artificial device intended only to lead to her proposed progressive collective action.

It is also noteworthy that the idea of guilt responsibility prevents limitless personal burden and protects the realm of individual liberty by clearly discriminating a responsibility-bearer from others. This is the case with role responsibility as well. Young’s social connection model deviates from both of these two standard forms of responsibility in asserting the blanket distribution of responsibility across all citizens. In so doing, it makes itself vulnerable to the moral-hero objection that has dogged Singer’s view.
3. The Right to Subsistence

As the close look at Young’s responsibility-based view has revealed its difficulties, it may be worthwhile to explore, as an alternative, the possibilities of the right-based theory. Many authors, notably Henry Shue, have based their arguments upon the idea of human rights or the similar notion of basic rights, and these concepts have recently been supported by some responsibility-based theorists. In focusing on the issue of transnational economic justice, however, they pay scant attention to sufficientarianism, which is advanced in the context of domestic redistribution. In this section, I endeavour to develop a version of the right-based theory by examining several aspects of sufficientarianism.

According to one critic, sufficientarianism consists of two theses: the positive thesis affirms that everyone has enough to maintain a standard of living above a reasonable threshold, and the negative thesis denies that equality or priority has any role to play above the threshold. It is incorrect, however, to characterise sufficientarianism as excluding the idea of priority because some sufficientarians make use of this idea. I here focus on the positive thesis, which seems helpful to the purpose of elaborating the right-based theory.

There are some questions concerning the positive thesis, three of which I single out. The first concerns the measure of sufficiency. Harry Frankfurt argues against egalitarianism and puts forward sufficientarianism in terms of income, regarding a person’s income as an index of her welfare. Roger Crisp and Robert Huseby explicitly address this position in welfarist terms. Nonetheless, welfarism suffers from several paradoxes and problems. A paradox particularly relevant to world poverty is the adaptive preference formation, which refers to the fact that one tends to appreciate meagre options where feasible alternatives are severely limited. It is at times observed that those deprived or discriminated against are satisfied with their poor situation. Because welfarism is not capable of excluding adaptively formed preferences from the amalgamating procedure, a more promising approach may be its major rival, that is, resourcism. What is apt in the context of global distributive justice might be the concept of the right to food, safe drinking water, shelter and access to medical care.
The second question is this: Where should the threshold be set? For Frankfurt, that a person has enough money means that she is content, or it is reasonable for her to be content, with having no more money than she already has.\textsuperscript{18} Basing sufficiency on the notion of an impartial spectator inspired by compassion, Crisp cites his intuition that eighty years of high-quality life is enough and plausibly more than enough.\textsuperscript{19} These high standards of living cannot offer any feasible solution for world poverty. A more suggestive view is Huseby’s proposal of two sufficiency levels, according to which the maximal sufficiency threshold equals a level of welfare with which a person is content, and the minimal threshold involves measures of subsistence.\textsuperscript{20} What the right-based theory demands is to secure for every person on the globe the threshold of the minimum means of safe and healthy subsistence. In this respect, my right-based view may be called subsistentarianism rather than sufficientarianism.

The last question considers how individuals living at distinct economic levels below the threshold should be treated. Although most sufficientarians do not inquire into this significant issue, Huseby discusses the treatment of those who live between his maximal and minimal thresholds. He says that they have absolute priority over those staying above the maximal line and that priority works with weighted aggregation among them. To illustrate his point, suppose that a group of rich people, \( R \), exists above the maximal threshold. Suppose further that one medium group, \( M^H \), is better off than another, \( M^L \), between the maximal and minimal lines. In Huseby’s view, both \( M^H \) and \( M^L \) hold priority over \( R \), and \( M^L \) over \( M^H \), although \( M^L \)’s priority to \( M^H \) fades as the number of \( M^L \) members becomes smaller in comparison with that of \( M^H \) people and as the quantity of the benefits gained by these members decreases. He suggests that a group of poor people remaining below the minimal threshold, \( P \), has strong priority. However, he does not clarify what strong priority denotes, except to say that by it he means something less than absolute priority and more than straightforward weighted aggregation.

Given that nearly one billion people currently live below the World Bank’s poverty line of US $1.25 per day, it is of crucial importance to explore the question of how to treat those who remain at various levels of poverty below the threshold of minimum safety and health. The subsistence right supports pure priority as opposed
to priority coupled with aggregation. This is in part because the very idea of a right involves more or less the force to restrict aggregative calculation and because such a fundamental right as the subsistence right should employ this force to the fullest. Suppose that one tenth of the whole population in a developing country, $P^L$, live far below the threshold of safe and healthy subsistence, while four tenth, $P^H$, remain slightly below it. Further suppose that the current budget of an international organisation allows for either the policy of raising $P^L$’s living standard to the threshold or that of improving $P^H$’s, but it cannot afford both. The subsistence-right argument claims that the entire budget should be devoted to $P^L$ (and then demands the budget be expanded for the sake of $P^H$).

As I argue elsewhere at some length, our duty correlative to the subsistence right of the global needy does not oblige us to directly participate in collective action intended to remedy distributive injustice.$^{21}$ The government, which is to act in the name of its citizens, bears an obligation to promote the subsistence right of those living in poor countries on behalf of its own citizens. In so doing, it can reduce the moral burden on its citizens and protect the realm of individual freedom. My version of the right-based theory is thus immune from the moral-hero criticism faced by Young.

4. Conclusion

My aim in this paper was to meet two challenges. The first was to examine a powerful version of the responsibility-based theory—Young’s social connection model. Based on my negative assessment of her model, I then turned to the second charge of developing a form of the right-based theory by exploring some issues surrounding sufficientarianism. I recognise that this form requires further explication and elaboration. Nevertheless, even my abbreviated discussion, I hope, shows that a right-based approach to global justice is more promising than a responsibility-based one.
Notes

* This paper is a revised version of my essay, ‘Global Justice: What Do We Owe to the Poor?’ in Living Responsibility, ed. by Stefano Ramello, Inter-Disciplinary Press, forthcoming. An earlier version of the paper was presented at the 2nd Global Conference, ‘Living Responsibility: Ethical Issues in Everyday Life’, Prague, 2012. I would like to thank participants in the conference for their numerous questions and comments. This work was supported by JSPS Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (B) (#23330002).

5. Sympathetic discussions of Young’s works can be found in Ann Ferguson and Mechthild Nagel, eds., Dancing with Iris: The Philosophy of Iris Marion Young (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). For a critical examination of Pogge’s position, see Alison M. Jaggar, ed., Thomas Pogge and His Critics (Cambridge: Polity, 2010).
7. Young, Responsibility for Justice, 43–44.
8. Ibid., 52.
9. Ibid., 91–92.
10. Ibid., 126–127.


18. Frankfurt, *Importance of What We Care About*, 152.

