Chapter 15
Global Economic Justice, Partiality, and Coercion

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1 Two Liberal Views

My subject is global economic justice, the division of economic resources among human beings. Questions of non-economic justice involving rights to security, liberty of action, freedom of speech, religion, and political participation, will come into the picture now and then. But my central focus is economic justice.

Two liberal views about global economic justice are currently being debated by political philosophers. Cosmopolitanism holds that the most basic principles of economic justice apply directly to individuals across the globe, and require a just division of economic resources among all human beings. As Kok-Chor Tan puts it,

principles of justice ought to transcend nationality and citizenship, and ought to apply equally to all individuals of the world as a whole…cosmopolitan justice is justice without borders.¹

The other view—let’s call it Liberal Nationalism²—holds that the most basic principles of economic justice apply to individuals only within particular societies. Economic justice is first and foremost about the division of resources within a sovereign state. It is ‘domestic’, rather than ‘global’. Principles of global economic justice exist, but they primarily focus on relationships among states, not among individuals.³

³ This is a simple statement of liberal nationalism. Some complexities will be addressed below.
On the cosmopolitan view, sovereign states play a derivative or instrumental role, as necessary agents for producing global justice among individuals. On the liberal nationalist view, states play a fundamental role. They constitute the primary context for economic justice.

Because it locates justice first and foremost at home, liberal nationalists will think it often more important to attend to the needs of the members of their own society, even if this means neglecting more urgent needs of those in other societies. Partiality towards the interests of co-nationals is a fundamental implication of the view. Cosmopolitans deny that this ordering is just. They can, however, allow partiality as an instrumental matter, when it is the only or best means for bringing about just economic relations among individuals as such.

Both of these views are liberal views. Liberal political theory embraces a deep-seated commitment to human equality that has been expressed in different ways, e.g. that people are of equal moral worth, that they must be treated as equals, and that they are entitled to equal concern and respect.4 Liberals also hold that all people possess certain basic rights, e.g. rights to security, to liberty, and to a minimally decent level of material welfare.

Liberal nationalists therefore tend to endorse cosmopolitan (or universalist) principles about human rights that apply to all, independently of their nationality. Both views agree that states and individuals have obligations to ensure that all people can exercise these basic rights. Because of this, cosmopolitan and liberal nationalist views have similar practical implications in the current world in which a large percentage of the earth’s population lacks basic human rights and live in dire poverty.

In The Law of Peoples, John Rawls expresses a liberal nationalist view. He argues, however, that well-off societies have a duty to help burdened societies become well-ordered. He also thinks that all humans have a right to sufficient material goods “to enable them to make intelligent and effective use of their freedoms.”5 This linking of freedom to a decent level of economic goods means that well-off countries have stringent obligations to those in poorer countries. Given the widespread poverty and misery in our world, both theories require aid to the global poor significantly beyond what well-off countries currently supply.

The primary competitor to both liberal views on global justice is the idea that affluent citizens and countries either have no obligations to the global poor or have only minor ones. Such a view has no agreed upon name and is not currently under serious debate by political philosophers. It is analogous to views on domestic justice that emphasize libertarian rights or desert: rich countries or well-off individuals either have rights to keep what they have earned through their individual efforts or deserve to do so.

4 Ronald Dworkin has made “treatment as an equal” central to the liberal idea. For an early expression of this see “Liberalism”, in Stuart Hampshire, Public and Private Morality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).