AGENCY, COERCION, AND GLOBAL JUSTICE: A REPLY TO MY CRITICS

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ABSTRACT. Mathias Risse, Andrea Sangiovanni, and Kok-Chor Tan have offered some subtle and powerful criticisms of the ideas given in my *Justice and Foreign Policy*. Three themes in particular recur in their critiques. The first is that the arguments I make in that book rest upon unjustified, arbitrary, or contradictory premises. The second is that the use of coercion in the analysis of distributive justice is a mistake. The third is that the global institutional set represents, contrary to my arguments, an independent first-order site of justice. I address these criticisms, and try to vindicate the methodology of *Justice and Foreign Policy* in the face of these objections.

The critical attention of very smart philosophers is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, that attention is the heart of the discipline of philosophy; being ignored is generally more painful than being criticized, and criticism contains at least the possibility of new ideas and new thoughts. We show respect for one another, on this understanding, through sustained and vigorous criticism. On the other hand, it is often a bit overwhelming to be shown the shortcomings in one’s work, especially by philosophers who are careful, thorough, and rigorous in their attentions. It is often a bit tempting to simply say: I wish I’d written a better book.

Mathias Risse, Andrea Sangiovanni, and Kok-Chor Tan are, indeed, careful, thorough, and rigorous. My own thoughts on global and international justice could not have developed as they did without engagement with their writings; each of them has written work that is among the very best the field of political philosophy has produced. I am enormously grateful to them, both for this and for their willingness to engage critically with my own work. The criti-
cisms they have offered are powerful, and I think a full engagement with the subtleties of their arguments would require another book. What I hope to do in this paper, though, is comparatively more modest. I want to address three concerns that emerge across the critical essays written by these philosophers, and see what the ideas I use in *Justice and Foreign Policy* might have to say in response to these concerns. I do not think, of course, that what I say here should convince them. I do not, in fact, think that I want to offer a blanket defense of *Justice and Foreign Policy* as it stands; while I stand by the philosophical perspective that book explores, I hope that this perspective might be better developed and defended in later, better, books, whether or not those books are mine. I am, as before, grateful to Risse, Sangiovanni, and Tan, for the conversations from which those better books might emerge.¹

I will therefore discuss three themes in what follows. The first deals with the status of what is assumed in my analysis of international justice and in the ethics of foreign policy. Several different versions of this criticism have been put forward by my critics: my arguments, these critics contend, rest on unmotivated assumptions about liberalism, inconsistent assumptions about what is changeable and what is not in public life, and irrelevant assumptions about the necessity of coercion. I deal with each of these in the first section of this paper. The second theme is the nature of coercion. Sangiovanni provides two powerful criticisms of my use of this concept. The first is that I cannot use a moralized baseline for the identification of coercion, without running into problems in the interpretation of state action. The second is that coercion cannot be meaningfully related to distributive justice on either an *outweighing* or *compensating* vision of how that justice makes coercion legitimate. I respond to these worries in the second section of the paper. The final section of this paper deals with the nature of global institutions, and with whether or not they might be sites of justice – first-order sites, to use my terminology. Tan argues that the global regime as a whole must be regarded as creating norms of property and resource rights, such that basic global norms of exclusion and resource holdings can only be understood with reference to the global system of rules; that system of rules, though, must be understood on its own terms, as an

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