Global Equality of Resources

Every day we make decisions about whether to consume or invest our resources, we rely on international trade which enables us to buy and sell products with people living in other parts of the world, we purchase shares in companies with interests in oil, gas, metals and precious stones, and in some cases donate money to countries who are struggling. But all of these choices are for naught from the perspective of global justice unless we know what shares of resources we fairly have at our disposal in the first place. It is tempting at this stage to evoke the principle that every individual on Earth is entitled, upon reaching the age of majority, to an equal share of the planet’s natural resources or to the value thereof. This helps us to evaluate the plight of people living in resource-poor countries such as Armenia, Belarus, Benin, Burkina Faso, Comoros, French Polynesia, Guam or the Cook Islands whose poverty may stem in large measure from a lack of proximity to natural resources. Nevertheless, the principle of equal entitlement is not enough by itself to capture the full demands of justice as global equal concern. There are two reasons for this. The first is that it overlooks the situation of people faced with the ‘resource curse’: a paradoxical state of affairs in which a country with abundant natural resources in fact enjoys lower economic growth than a country without that gift. This can happen in different ways. One is that the good luck of being born into a country with abundant natural resources is meaningless without development capacity. One need only compare the fortunes of Japan and the Pacific Islands to see this point. Japan is one of the richest countries in the world despite having meagre natural resources, whereas inhabitants of the Pacific Islands are among the globe’s poorest people in the face of abundant natural resources. Nor can we overlook the situation of millions of people living in countries across Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia where life chances are hindered by a lack of the development expertise required
to make use of their average or above average compliment of natural resources. Another version of the resource curse occurs when the good luck of being born into a country with abundant natural resources is ruined as a result of weak property rights and/or prolonged periods of political mismanagement, corruption and civil war. This particular form of the resource curse has befallen a great many countries in sub-Saharan Africa not least Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Angola, Equatorial Guinea and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The second reason why equality of entitlement is insufficient for global distributive justice is that it fails to take account of other kinds of brute luck factors which can affect people’s life chances such as poor health endowment, bad climate, crop failures and natural disasters of various kinds. In this chapter, I try to develop a theory of global equality of resources that is appropriately sensitive to all these inequalities.

But the devil, as they say, is in the detail. A complete statement of global equality of resources must address the following questions. What would it mean for there to exist an equal distribution of the planet’s natural resources? What would global equality of resources demand over time once an equal distribution of natural resources had been achieved? Finally, what kinds of things are rightly governed by principles of global equality of resources? In what follows I develop a Dworkinian answer to these questions. I call this a Dworkinian answer because it proceeds on the basis of a similar thought experiment involving shipwreck survivors, employs a comparable conceptual framework including distinctions between ambition and endowment, option and brute luck, and employs equality of resources as the standard of egalitarian justice, where this is defined in terms of the familiar tools of the envy test, an imaginary auction and hypothetical insurance markets. These various components are reinterpreted, however, to take account of distinctive aspects of the global political arena. Things are not plain sailing here. Significant cultural differences at the global level raise questions over the appropriateness of the auction method and the use of insurance. Not only do many people wish to be treated as members of nations and not merely as individuals but there is also tremendous diversity in cultural attitudes concerning the value of different kinds of natural resources, what people may or may not do with resources, the relative importance of common versus private ownership, the moral standing of commercial insurance and what ought to count as option or brute luck. This pluralism can make it difficult to articulate, apply and implement equality of resources at the global level without favouring some groups of people over others. Even so, I shall argue that with the right amendments it is possible to develop a tolerably complete statement of the view that can operate at