
Motivation and global justice: Philosophy and practice

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THERE IS A persistent gap between what cosmopolitan theorists tell us would be a just world, and the world in which we live, where huge numbers of people (18 million, on one estimate) die of poverty-related causes every year. Indeed, there is a persistent gap between the actual transfers of resources between rich countries and poor countries, and the minimum obligations owed to the global poor claimed even by some critics of cosmopolitan thought. A central part of the argument against cosmopolitanism is the claim that cosmopolitan accounts of obligations owed by persons in the rich countries to the poorest persons in the world's poorest countries are not motivating. One predictable response that a philosopher might give would be to say that, while it is the job of a philosopher to work out what is just, it is the job of someone else, perhaps a social scientist, to explain why an actual agent fails to do what is just. However, to answer in this way is wilfully to miss the opportunity not only to engage in philosophically valid and valuable questions, but also to explore what philosophy can learn from empirical research and vice-versa.

On 22–23 June 2011 at the University of York, an international group of philosophers and political theorists met with NGO practitioners and human rights scholars to discuss questions around individual motivation and global justice, at a workshop sponsored by the British Academy and Society for Applied Philosophy. The participants included Professor Carol Gould (CUNY), Professor Susan Mendus FBA (York), Dr Katrin Flikschuh (LSE), Dr Graham Long (Newcastle), Dr Kerri Woods (York), Dr Simon Hope (Stirling) and Dr Lea Ypi (Oxford) amongst the theorists, with Kathryn Long (Save the Children), Jonathan Ensor (Practical Action), and Professor Paul Gready (York) amongst the practitioners.

The discussion centred on two principal themes. The first advertised theme concerned what political philosophy can contribute to addressing the problem of motivation in relation to global justice, and what philosophers and practitioners might learn from one another in this context. The second theme, which emerged throughout the workshop, might be called 'the ethics of global justice'. Thinking about how, philosophically, one might respond to the 'motivational gap' quickly prompted a series of broader and more complex questions that revealed a dissatisfaction with the field of global justice as it is predominantly pursued in Anglo-American analytical moral and political philosophy.

There were sceptical contributions, such as that from Simon Hope, who doubted whether the project of addressing motivation was properly one for political philosophy, or Susan Mendus, who worried that theorists of global justice were too much concerned with thinking about the ways in which we might be better people, and insufficiently alert to the kinds of value conflicts that the project of global justice really entails for those said to be under a duty to bring it about. There were also broadly optimistic responses, such as that offered by Carol Gould, who pointed to the existence of transnational networks of solidarity as a powerful source of inspiration, and a site of negotiation around what global justice means and what it demands.

It was clear in this and in other contributions that global justice understood as a question about how much 'we' in the rich countries, individually or collectively, ought to give, either financially or in terms of time and campaigning energy, is too narrow a question. Yet this is a question that recurs in the literature, taking a cue contemporarily from Thomas Pogge's influential work, and from a whole slew of papers and books that have debated the issue since at least the early 1970s – when Peter Singer famously argued that people ought to contribute all they could to aid persons affected by the famine in East Bengal (as it then was) without sacrificing something of comparable moral value.¹

This literature has been in part directed by numbers. In 2005 the economist Jeffrey Sachs claimed that world poverty could be ended by 2025 if all the G8 countries gave 0.7% of their GDP to funding the Millennium Development Goals, along with a concomitant 'big push' of Bill and Melinda Gates style philanthropy from rich individuals.² At a slightly more down-to-earth level, Oxford philosopher Toby Ord has set up the Giving What We Can project, which has the commendable goal of encouraging many more people who may not think of themselves as particularly rich, but who live moderately comfortable lives in richer countries, to recognise the contribution they could make.³ As such, the project's website has a calculator that tells you how many lives you will save, as a function of the amount of money you pledge to give.

These sorts of numbers set the scene for the debate one finds within the philosophical literature on global justice about how much 'we' ought to give, but there is a good deal of ethics to be unpacked in who is included in that 'we', and what the would-be recipients of this unidirectional account

¹ T. Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights* (Polity, 2002); P. Singer, 'Famine, Affluence and Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (1972).

² J. Sachs, *The End of Poverty* (Penguin, 2005).

³ www.givingwhatwecan.org

of global justice actually need or want. These figures also mask the greatly varying contexts of communities living in extreme poverty. The narrow question about motivation is in fact only one aspect of a set of broader questions to be asked about global justice.

As Paul Gready pointed out, environmental responsibility is (slowly) becoming embedded in people's everyday lives: people in the UK at any rate are becoming used to recycling and thinking about their transport choices, and taking some steps towards accepting responsibility for their contribution to environmental sustainability. Some part of the motivational problem, then, is connected to the difficulty of similarly embedding responsibility for global justice in everyday people's everyday lives. But there is also a deeper set of questions to be asked about what it is that we are trying to motivate, what assumptions are validated in framing the problem in this way, what are the implications for agency and justice if the globally just gaze is unidirectional.

Here Katrin Flikschuh's paper, co-authored with Helen Lauder (Ghana), was particularly salient. Flikschuh and Lauder raise the intriguing question of why fieldwork is not typically thought to be a necessary part of the study of issues such as global justice by political philosophers and theorists. No doubt some philosophers have done just this, and many

more take pains to be well-informed about the empirical realities of the sorts of cases that are the subject of our theorising. Most theorists, though, are accustomed to thinking of fieldwork as something undertaken by our empirically-inclined colleagues, and not obviously something that philosophical work demands. Yet the universalising tendencies of analytically-trained philosophers to identify the content of duties based on, say, an abstract account of basic needs, or the necessary conditions of agency, might well lead us to overlook some factors that prove inconvenient for our theories – such as the preferences of at least some persons in post-colonial states towards stronger state sovereignty, rather than a weakening of sovereignty and burgeoning cosmopolitan order. Another element highlighted in this critique of the conventional practice of theorising about global justice is the tendency to talk about 'the global poor' or 'distant others' as a homogenous category and one that is opposed to the 'we' of individual agents in the rich West.

NGO practitioners and development and human rights scholars no doubt have the resources to combat, or indeed correct, some of these difficulties. NGOs can act as a conduit through which information about both the specificity of communities and individuals and their circumstances might be communicated, as well as these communities'



Media coverage and NGO appeals have a familiar narrative. They aim to engage our emotions – sympathy, compassion, and also guilt. Yet there is a tension between the need to respect the dignity of individuals and at the same time challenge the short attention span of the Western media. The DEC appeal has made extensive use of this photograph in their East Africa Crisis Appeal. Although a direct and haunting image, it avoids the 'starvation pornography' referred to in the article. Photo © Phil Moore/Concern Worldwide.

self-expressed needs and desires. But the manner of collecting and presenting that information matters, and the ethics of this plays out along several dimensions.

In the weeks after the workshop, the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) launched an appeal to raise funds to provide relief for the famine in East Africa, particularly in Somalia. Media coverage and NGO appeals have a familiar narrative; they present stories of hardship and extreme need alongside pictures of malnourished young children, they aim to engage our emotions, most often sympathy and compassion, sometimes also guilt. Graham Long's contribution to the workshop focused on the legitimacy of such emotional manipulation on the part of NGOs. Should those who are not responsible for global injustice be made to feel guilty about it? Should those who have done their fair share be asked to do more?

NGO practitioners, meanwhile, felt a tension between the need to be respectful of their clients in developing countries in the way that they are presented to would-be donors, and the demands created by the short attention span of the Western media alongside the challenge of engaging would-be donors in the context of many competing claims for their attention, time, and money. In this context, emotional manipulation looks like a necessary though inadequate tool. NGOs such as Save the Children and Practical Action aim to build a sense of solidarity on the part of their donors with their clients, an approach argued by some engaged in debates on global justice, and indeed by this author, to be crucial to bridging the motivational gap with which we began. What, after all, are the motivations to be just at all: where self-interest and reciprocity are unavailable to us, as they largely seem to be in the case of global justice, then extending the moral community by encouraging a sense of solidarity seems to be one of only a few options.

But the means matters a great deal. The title of a recent opinion piece by a Nairobi-based journalist gives a flavour of

the concerns here: in 'Starvation Pornography: How Many Skinny Babies Can You Show Me?'⁴, Katy Migiro reports her experience of covering the East African famine in the aftermath of the DEC appeal, of television producers in Western capitals negotiating with aid workers for a suitably grim and desperate picture to be ready for the journalists about to be parachuted into the region, of the bemused responses of local aid workers and journalists. The question theorists of global justice face here is whether engaging sympathy in these terms generates a sense of solidarity or one of spectacle. From thinking about global justice in terms of the number of skinny babies to be saved, do we learn what a just world would be? The demands of global justice may be rather more nuanced and detailed and complex than this. That being the case, the question about motivation remains, but is even more challenging.

What I think we may be persuaded of is the value of theorists, practitioners, and practice-oriented scholars working collaboratively on these issues. Theorists and philosophers cannot articulate what is just without a concrete, as well as an abstract, knowledge of needs and desires, not least because, as at least some theorists have long known, our unconscious biases can be pernicious. Practitioners can also, I hope, gain something from being exposed to the concerns of ethicists who question the very means by which most ethicists will have the opportunity to learn about some of the concrete needs and desires of particular and contextualised communities and individuals who comprise what is referred to as 'the global poor'.

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⁴ www.trust.org/alertnet/news/starvation-pornography-how-many-skinny-babies-can-you-show-me/