

Chapter 7

National responsibility and international justice

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3 The exceptions would be per-capita well-off countries within which it is easy to remove all serious burdens due to inferior social opportunities and to do what can be done to alleviate specially severe natural misfortunes. I am not sure such countries exist.

4 This includes concessional loans less repayment of principal, as well as grants, and contributions to multilateral programs, as well as bilateral aid. See *World Development Indicators: 2002* (Washington: World Bank, 2002), pp. 358f. In 1995, 72.7 percent of this aid was subject to restrictions on procurement sources, presumably favorable to US manufacturing and agricultural interests (*ibid.*, p. 357, where no more recent figure is provided for the United States)

5 Some might disagree with my assessment of the impact of the disappointing meal, claiming that it makes my life worse but only insignificantly so. I do not think that this disagreement matters for present purposes. At the cost of some awkwardness, those who have this alternative assessment can take "worse" to abbreviate "significantly worse," wherever the disagreement would otherwise lead them to resist my arguments about aid.

6 Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 1 (1972), 232.

7 In "The Possibility of Special Duties," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 16 (1986), 651-76, Philip Pettit and Robert Goodin emphasize the benefits of widely shared norms allocating special responsibilities. They are not concerned, however, with the moral status of closeness and deploy a rule-consequentialist framework which has very different consequences, especially for foreign aid, from the morality of equal respect that I am exploring.

8 Here, I have benefited from Kamm's intriguing tentative suggestion that the duty "to take care of what is associated with oneself: for example, the area near one" is "the flip side" of the "prerogative to give greater weight to one's own interests rather than giving equal weight to oneself and to others." (See Frances Kamm, "Famine Ethics," in Dale Jamieson, ed., *Singer and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 200.) However, an alleged duty to take care of what is associated with oneself seems much too broad in scope. After all, the former owner has no responsibility to continue to take care of his distinctive, monogrammed cast-off clothes. One needs to find a prerogative specifically concerned with what is closeby that directly generates a responsibility for what happens there without further appeal to mere "association."

9 Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, *Giving USA 2002* (Indianapolis: AAFRC Trust for Philanthropy, 2002), pp. 19, 125. This amount included corporate and foundation as well as individual giving.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 147.

11 See Table 13, OECD, 2002 *Development Cooperation Report*, www.oecd.org/xls/M00037000/M00037866.xls.

When we think about what justice requires us to do for other people, we often find ourselves pulled in opposite directions. On the one hand, human beings are needy and vulnerable creatures who cannot live decent, let alone flourishing, lives unless they are given at least a minimum bundle of freedoms, opportunities, and resources. They must have freedom to think and act, the opportunity to learn and to work, the resources to feed and clothe themselves. Where people lack these conditions, it seems that those who are better endowed have obligations of justice to help provide them. On the other hand, human beings are choosing agents who must take responsibility for their own lives. This means that they should be allowed to enjoy the benefits of success, but it also means that they must bear the costs of failure. If people have poor or otherwise inadequate lives because of decisions or actions for which they are responsible, then outsiders have no obligation of justice to intervene. It might still be a worthy humanitarian objective to provide aid to those who are responsible for their own impoverishment, but it is not a matter of justice, and it would be wrong to compel people to pursue it.

This dialectic between respecting people as beings with essential needs and respecting people as responsible agents is played out in many contexts, for instance in debates about the form that the institutions of a welfare state should take within a political community. In this essay I want to explore how it should shape our thinking about international justice, and especially our obligations to poor people in distant countries. The idea that millions of malnourished, unhealthy, desperate people might in some sense be responsible for their own plight may strike readers as so barbarous a thought that they are disinclined to pursue this line of enquiry any further. But given the central role played by ideas of choice and responsibility within liberal philosophy especially,

and Norwegians have conceptions of justice that are much more alike than those of Americans and Japanese).¹ Nonetheless cultural difference matters, for reasons that I will give in a moment.

Second, where communities are politically organized, as in the case of nation-states, people are empowered, within limits, to take decisions that will later affect the freedoms, opportunities, and resources available to the members of each community. The extent of this political autonomy is controversial. It is often claimed that global economic forces have reduced the scope of national decision-making, in economic policy especially, virtually to nothing. I do not share this view, but I would add that in any case there is still much scope for decisions that affect people's life-chances in a fundamental way outside of the economic sphere (think of decisions that concern the security and freedom of women, for example). Where someone's share of opportunities and so forth can be traced back to a decision taken or a policy followed by her political community, and where she was involved in taking that decision, there seems *prima facie* to be a case for saying that her having that share is just, according to principles of responsibility such as those referred to in the opening paragraph. Of course there is a significant gap between *individual* responsibility for outcomes and *collective* responsibility, and this is an issue that will concern us later in the essay. For the moment, I want only to underline the fact that we live in a world in which there is not just one centre of political decision, but many centres, and this fact, I claim, must shape our understanding of international justice.

What can justice mean in a world made up of culturally distinct communities each enjoying some degree of political autonomy? It cannot require that everyone everywhere must enjoy the same bundle of freedoms, opportunities, and resources – a view that I shall refer to as global equality of opportunity.² It cannot require this because people in different communities will want to have these advantages distributed in different ways. In particular, they will attach different relative weights to different components of the bundle. In some places, people may attach very great importance to personal freedom – the freedom to execute one's own individual plan of life with as little outside interference as possible – and so they may wish to limit the scope of government control and economic redistribution as far as they can. Elsewhere people may place more value on democratic participation and the opportunity to exercise collective control over their social environment. In other places still, economic security – having a guaranteed job and/or a guaranteed income – may be rated above either personal freedom or democratic

that conclusion would be premature. We must follow the dialectic where it leads and, as I shall try to show in the course of the essay, it need not lead to the conclusion that we have no obligations to the distant poor. On the contrary, our obligations may be quite substantial. But we need to be clear about their basis and their limits.

Liberal thinking about problems of international justice is often distorted by an individualism that refuses to attach ethical significance to membership of communities and groups, and especially politically organized communities such as nation-states. Liberals recognize, of course, that these collective bodies may play a crucial role in *delivering* justice – in providing freedoms, opportunities, and resources to those who need them – but they tend to ignore their existence when spelling out what justice requires in the first place. Thus a claim frequently made is that such memberships are morally arbitrary: it is unjust if one person enjoys a greater share of advantages than another merely because the first belongs to one community while the second belongs to another. This has the corollary that the principles of justice that apply internationally should be exactly the same as those that apply within nation-states or indeed within communities of other kinds. It may be more feasible, on this view, to implement justice domestically than it is to implement it globally, but this is just a matter of practicalities. The principles themselves are invariant.

I describe this view as a distorted one because I believe that it misconstrues the significance of community membership, even from a liberal perspective. The fact that our world is not made up simply of individuals with differing capacities, tastes, needs and so forth, but also contains distinct communities, often with their own political structures, matters for two reasons at least. First it means that people are immersed in distinct cultures that shape both their general conceptions of value and more specifically their understandings of justice itself. Moreover they identify with those cultures, in the sense that they do not regard their cultural attachments as burdensome but as defining positively the kind of people that they are. In saying this I don't mean to deny that people often have different levels of cultural identification – for instance that alongside national identities they may have ethnic, religious, political and other such identities. Nor do I mean to suggest that there is no overlap in the content of what people belonging to different communities believe. If we look, for instance, at how social justice is understood in different parts of the world, we find much common ground as well as some divergence (the extent of the divergence also varies: Swedes

control. (These examples are not, I hope, purely hypothetical.) In that case, why should justice require that an identical package of benefits be provided for the members of each community? Why shouldn't the priority rules and the trade-offs between different elements in the bundle that a particular society adopts correspond to the judgments made by its own members rather than outsiders?

Consider next the impact of cultural factors and political decisions over time. Suppose each community were to begin with a roughly equal share of natural resources per capita, so that we could say that in one important sense their starting positions were equal.³ How those resources are used, however, will depend upon a host of factors, such as the system of property rights that is established by law, the form of work organisation that is adopted, the level of enterprise and industry displayed by the members, and so forth. We have no reason to expect that a few decades later per capita resources will still be equal across communities. Nor does there seem to be any injustice about this, since the differences that emerge can be traced to the cultural values and political choices of the members of each community, and these in turn are features for which the members in question are properly held responsible.⁴ Justice in a world of nations cannot mean global equality of opportunity for individuals.

The picture I have just painted is of course an idealized version of the actual world that we inhabit. In the actual world, many states are culturally divided, their members have little control over the direction in which their society develops, and communities impact on one another in such a way that the options open to some may be quite limited. These are important factors that we must take into account as we proceed. But equally we should not lose sight of the considerations presented above. These are powerful enough for us to reject the claim that membership in a political community is morally arbitrary, and that the principles of global justice are simply the principles of social justice writ large. We need to begin our thinking in a different place. We need in fact to go back to the two potentially conflicting requirements of justice with which we began.

These ideas, to recall, were first that justice requires us to provide human beings generally with the means to lead a minimally decent life; but second that people should be treated as responsible agents and asked to bear the consequences of their own actions and decisions. If we want to apply these ideas in the international arena, we have to address three basic issues. First, we have to be able to specify a minimum bundle of

freedoms, opportunities and resources that are considered universally necessary for a decent life, and that justice therefore requires us to secure for everyone in the first instance. Second, we have to decide when it is reasonable to hold people responsible for their own condition, even if this should mean their having less than the minimum bundle, and to decide this in settings where responsibility is collective rather than individual. Third, in cases where people have less than the minimum bundle, and are *not* responsible for having less, we have to allocate what I shall call remedial responsibility – we have to decide who else to hold responsible for bringing them up to that threshold. Once all three issues have been addressed, we will be able to spell out at least some of the core requirements of international justice – in particular to determine what obligations fall on the citizens of rich nations to transfer resources and other forms of aid to those in poor countries.⁵

SETTING INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS OF DECENCY

What drives the thought that justice may require us to provide aid to distant strangers? It is surely our sense that people in many places are forced to live lives that we regard as intolerable. We cannot see how anyone could lead a worthwhile life without physical security, adequate food, the opportunity to work, and so forth. Presented with concrete cases, we have no doubt about what justice demands. But it is harder to set down the principles that guide such judgments, particularly in the light of what has been said already about cultural difference. How can we be sure that our notions of decency do not simply reflect our own culturally specific conceptions of the good life?

We might turn for guidance here to the various manifestos of human rights that were issued in the second half of the twentieth century, especially perhaps to the seminal document in this area, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, adopted by the UN in 1948. After all the aim of these manifestos was to lay down for the international community a set of standards that every state should be expected to meet, and so in intention at least the list of human rights they contained was to be cross-culturally valid. Yet it should come as no surprise that the documents in question proved to be controversial in practice, for on closer inspection they ranged between rights that do indeed correspond to the basic conditions of human decency (such as the right not to be tortured and the right to freedom of movement) and rights that are closer to being aspirations, in the sense that they form part of the manifesto-writers'

access to suitable food has the capability to be adequately nourished. For any given person we can construct a capability set, in other words a list of all the capabilities that the person possesses. Sen suggests that we can use the capability set to measure that person's substantive freedom.

The advantage of Sen's approach, for our purposes, is that it focuses directly on what people can and cannot do, and this seems the right focus if we want to set a decency threshold (people who are starving fall below that threshold because they cannot be adequately nourished, whereas people who are fasting voluntarily do not). But it also contains some problems. First, the idea of a capability does not by itself distinguish between capabilities without which people cannot lead decent lives – like the capability to be adequately nourished – and capabilities which are valuable, but not in that way essential – like the capability to read and understand books of philosophy. Sen implicitly draws a distinction between basic capabilities and the rest, for he defines poverty as “the deprivation of basic capabilities” and gives as examples of such deprivation premature mortality, undernourishment, and illiteracy.⁷ These examples are intuitively convincing, but Sen does not explain the principle that underlies his distinction.

A second problem is that cultures may vary in the weights they attach to realizing capabilities of different sorts. One culture may place a high premium on achieving material success, another on reaching a state of spiritual grace. If that is so, it may prove impossible to evaluate capability sets in a way that is genuinely neutral across cultures. Sen acknowledges that there is a real evaluative issue here, and eventually appeals to “public discussion” as a way of assessing the relative value of different capabilities. But this may mean that there is significant variation in the way that capability indices are constructed in different political communities. That does not matter if the indices are being used to guide domestic policy-making, but it does cause problems if our aim is to establish principles of international justice. For suppose that many people in society *S* fall below some decency standard according to the capability index that members of that society themselves endorse, but that according to the index that *we* favor they are above the line (suppose that the capacity to practice religion weighs heavily in their index but not in ours). We might legitimately wonder whether we have obligations of justice towards the members of *S*, given that they are deprived only in relation to cultural values that we do not share.

It might then seem that we should proceed as follows. First, we should look at each political community in turn and see how its members define

conception of the good polity. Take for instance the right to take part in the government of one's country (Article 21 of the *Universal Declaration*). Liberals will certainly regard this as an essential requirement of any just society, and, provided the form that the right takes is not specified too closely, their view may be echoed elsewhere. But ought we to say that human beings cannot lead decent lives unless they are able to participate in the government of their community? To say this would imply that, since democracy barely existed before the twentieth century, few human beings could have led minimally worthwhile lives before that period. But this is a highly implausible view. When we contemplate the lives of the great artists, scholars, scientists, and explorers of the Renaissance, for example, it hardly crosses our mind to ask whether they enjoyed rights of political participation. No doubt some did as a result of their success in their chosen field. But this is tangential to the question of how adequate their lives were.

One reason that official lists of human rights overshoot the mark, as far as our question is concerned, is that they make no distinction between rights that correspond directly to basic human needs, and rights whose importance is primarily instrumental. The right to political participation surely falls into the latter category. Although many people do indeed find value in engaging in political activities, the chief reason for regarding political participation as a right is that it serves to safeguard other rights that are more basic. Regimes that are subject to democratic control are far less likely to starve their subjects, torture them, deny freedom of expression, and so forth. This well-supported generalization fully justifies including the right in manifestos whose aim is the broader one of laying down conditions for the just state. But our interest is narrower. We want to know how to set standards of decency that may ground international duties of justice.

A more promising starting point is Amartya Sen's idea of basic capabilities.⁶ Sen argues that rather than look for psychological indicators of human well-being such as happiness, or material indicators that are at best imperfectly correlated with well-being such as income and wealth, we should begin with the idea of a functioning – an activity or a condition that a person is able to perform or achieve. Being in good health, being adequately nourished, being able to move around, being able to speak freely, are examples of functionings in Sen's sense. A person who is able to achieve a functioning is said to have the equivalent capability, whether or not she actually chooses to realize that functioning. Thus a person who chooses voluntarily to fast but otherwise has

the set of capabilities that are required for someone to have a minimally decent life (let's assume that there is rough agreement on where to set the threshold within each community). Then we should look at the intersection of all these sets – at the capabilities that *every* community agrees are essential. This would give us a genuinely international standard of decency. If someone fell below it, it would be universally agreed that his or her life was less than decent.

The trouble with this approach is that it makes the international standard hostage to what in some cases may be ill-informed beliefs about the conditions for a decent life. This is especially so when what is at stake are the needs of women. Members of some communities, including female members, may believe that women can have a decent life without capability C – access to contraception, or the opportunity to take paid work, for instance – whereas it can be shown, empirically, that women who lack C do not in general have adequate lives, even within the societies where the beliefs prevail.⁸ The intersection approach might not rule out even such barbaric practices as foot-binding or female circumcision if there turn out to be communities whose members believe that these practices do not compromise decency.

So we need to take a more objective approach, one that tries to determine what is *actually* necessary for people to lead decent lives in different cultural contexts, as opposed to what people in those cultures may believe is necessary. And here we must appeal to the fact that there are activities that humans engage in that are reiterated across contexts – activities such as working, playing, building dwellings, raising families, and so forth – so that although the form the activity takes may vary from community to community, the activity itself can be described as universal.⁹ Let us refer to these as *core* human activities. Then we can say that a person has a decent life when she has a capability set that enables her to engage in each of the core activities, given the conditions prevailing in the society she belongs to. She is able to work, play, and so on, without having to bear unreasonable costs, and also without having to forgo some other core activity – so that a life would not count as decent if, say, the person in question had an opportunity to work, but only if she gave up the opportunity to raise a family.

The reference to prevailing conditions here is meant to capture the elementary point that whether or not one has capability C may depend on both physical and social features of one's surroundings – to decide whether a person is adequately sheltered from the elements one has to know about the local climate, but equally to decide whether a person

has the capability to work one has to know enough about local norms to say what penalties would be applied if the person in question began to work. We need to draw a line between obstacles that result from the social environment, and barriers that result from a person's own beliefs and preferences. Consider a person living in a country where the eating of pork is regarded as abhorrent, and imagine the unlikely situation in which the only available source of protein in that place is indeed pork. On the view I am defending, that person does not have the capacity to be adequately nourished. In contrast, someone who as a result of personal conviction is a vegetarian in a society where meat-eating is routinely accepted does have the capability in question, even if, because of the limited availability of vegetables, he would need to eat meat to realize it. This would be a case in which the person can achieve a functioning but chooses not to do so. Of course, in the former case, what prevents people from leading a decent life is a shared belief, enforced by social sanctions, that eating pork is sinful, and this opens up the question of where responsibility lies for the failure of decency – a question to be pursued shortly. At this point I am simply sketching an account of how an international decency standard should be set, and my claim is that to decide whether A does or does not have capability C we have to take as given the social conditions in which she finds herself.

So, to sum up, questions of international justice come into play whenever we encounter people whose lives are less than decent, which means that they cannot engage in the range of core human activities that we find recurring across culturally varied societies and that we may therefore take as central to human life. The question we should ask is not whether a given person does or does not engage in one of these activities – she may choose not to – but whether she has the relevant capability. Nor should we ask whether people in S themselves regard one of the activities in question as falling within the core – they may have culturally specific reasons for excluding a particular activity, or at least for denying its relevance to a particular sub-section of S. Our judgment must in this respect be more objective, which explains why we may be obliged by justice to provide the members of S with a certain resource, even though they themselves might prefer to have some other benefit that is irrelevant to decency – we might have an obligation to supply medical aid, but not consumer goods, even though the members of S, who don't attach much importance to bodily health, would prefer the latter. However to say that failures of decency bring questions of international justice into play is not yet to answer them. We must also ask about how

to assign responsibility for such failures. I take up that problem in the section that follows.

NATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

I remarked earlier that many people find repugnant the idea that nations might be held responsible for their own condition, when this idea is put forward in debates about global poverty. Yet in other contexts the idea of national responsibility is widely accepted. In particular, where nations have acted through their representatives in ways that cause harm to other peoples – taking aggressive military action, expropriating resources by unfair means, dumping polluting substances, and so forth – it is acknowledged almost without question that the nations in question owe debts of compensation, and that their members can rightly be made to bear the cost of paying those debts. This even extends to cases in which the harmful acts were perpetrated by previous generations. That we rely on ideas of national responsibility in making these judgments is not sufficient by itself to show that such ideas are coherent, but it does underline the point that abandoning the notion altogether would radically change the way we make political judgments – just as abandoning the idea of individual responsibility (if we could do it) would revolutionize large areas of our ethical thinking. So what can be said to support the claim that we may be justified in holding nations responsible for the results of their actions and policies?

National responsibility is clearly a species of collective responsibility, and this wider notion seems to make sense, at least in some relatively clear-cut cases. Let me sketch in a couple of these, as a way of introducing two models of collective responsibility that will be important later.¹⁰ A gang of teenage boys, out on the town for the night, come across an old truck and decide to go joy-riding. They urge each other on, hand round bottles of beer, take turns at driving the truck with greater and greater displays of bravado, until finally the inevitable happens and one member of the gang is seriously hurt as the truck swerves off the road. Here it seems natural to hold the gang collectively responsible for the injury. Although in a narrow sense we could say that the person whose hand was on the wheel at the time of the accident was responsible, in a broader and morally more relevant sense we can attribute the accident to the behaviour and frame of mind of the whole group, to which each member contributed. Inside the gang, a collective ethos is generated: this is never spelt out explicitly, but the gang members nevertheless share

ideas about how to behave, how to dress, and so on. Moreover they identify with their group and its common ethos. These facts are sufficient for us to hold members collectively responsible for the results of that ethos, without having to trace the exact causal relationship between the actions of any one particular member and those consequences.

For our second example, consider a small firm owned and managed by its employees, whose economic activities impose certain costs on the surrounding environment – for instance they involve dumping pollutants into a river. The employees know about these costs, and from time to time they discuss whether to change to a cleaner technology, but the majority are unwilling to make the capital investment that this would require. Here, too, we can hold the group collectively responsible for the results of their behaviour, and this may justify us in making them clean up the river, for instance. What generates collective responsibility here is not a common ethos, but a practice from which all the participants benefit (we can assume that decisions were taken democratically and that each employee shared in the net profit of the firm).

These cases were chosen because they were relatively clear-cut, and it may seem that we are taking a large step if we try to extend the idea of collective responsibility to nations. There appear to be two major points of divergence. First, it may be asked whether it makes sense to treat nations as collective actors in the same way as we treated the gang and the firm. Although we often speak loosely of Spain doing such and such or the people of Canada reaching this or that decision, it may be said that these expressions are indeed loose, and what we really mean is, for instance, that the Spanish *government* did something, or that a certain percentage of Canadians voted for policy P rather than Q. Second, it may be argued that we cannot treat nations either as embodiments of a genuinely shared ethos or as practices from which every member benefits; they are too culturally diverse, and contain too many sub-groups with conflicting interests, for either of our models of collective responsibility to apply. I shall consider each of these issues in turn.

National responsibility as it is commonly understood extends not only to the effects of formal political decisions and public policies, but also to the consequences of social practices (such as religious traditions, forms of family life, and so forth). When we attribute responsibility to nations in this way, we assume that these phenomena reflect widely shared beliefs and values. Suppose, for example, that a certain religious practice in society S has economic effects, reducing overall productivity. If we are to hold the members of S responsible for those effects, then

we must show that the practice embodies their own beliefs, and had not been imposed on them by a priestly caste, for instance. Similarly if a political decision is at stake, we need evidence that the decision reflects the values of the wider community. This will be easiest to provide in societies that are democratically governed, where we can point to electoral competition, attitude surveys, and so forth to demonstrate popular support for the policies pursued by the ruling party. However it would be too restrictive to say that national responsibility can only obtain in democratic societies. Even in autocratic regimes, the authority of the ruling elite may depend on the fact that they hold values and pursue policies that correspond more or less closely to those favoured by the population at large. Suppose that the rulers of a theocracy issue a decree that results in the death of some person deemed to be an apostate. If the issuing of the decree stems from religious norms that are generally accepted throughout the population, then we can properly say that responsibility for the death lies in some degree with the people as a whole.

An objection to this line of argument is that we cannot treat people as wholly responsible for their beliefs and values in the first place. We know about the effects of social conditioning, and we also know about the power of established regimes, especially autocratic ones, to brainwash their subjects into holding beliefs that may prove extremely damaging to their interests in the longer term. So why talk about national responsibility in these cases rather than the responsibility of those who hold the levers of power? This is a difficult issue that cannot be addressed properly here, but my brief response is that we need to make judgments about how far people can be expected to retain the capacity for independent thought and decision in the face of sustained propaganda efforts and the like. In the face of brainwashing of a certain intensity, we may conclude that it would take a heroic effort of will to resist, and that ordinary people must therefore be relieved of responsibility for the effects of the policies they are induced to support. But this is very different from normal processes of socialization whereby people are brought up to accept certain values and assumptions, come to regard those values and assumptions as part of their identity, and proceed to act on them politically. To deny collective responsibility in this more normal case is tantamount to denying responsibility altogether.¹¹

This objection does however reinforce the point that national responsibility is most easily attributed to political communities that are free and democratic, so that policies and decisions can be openly debated,

alternatives presented and people encouraged to reflect on their beliefs and values. Under these circumstances many traditional practices will doubtless still be followed, but because they are always open to challenge in principle, we can say with some confidence that they reflect sincerely held beliefs. Conversely, the more autocratic the community, the more hesitant we should be about attributing responsibility, and the less ready we should be to hold back from helping people whose lives are less than decent on the grounds that they are responsible for their condition.

Such an appeal to democratic processes does, however, lead us directly to the second of the two problems with the idea of national responsibility identified above, the problem of dissident minorities. How can we hold minorities responsible for the consequences of decisions or policies that they have opposed, or practices that they have refused to engage with? The argument about responsibility might work if every member of a national community had essentially the same values and interests, but as we know that is very far from being the case. It seems as though the effect of introducing notions of national responsibility into debates about international justice will either be to penalize or to unfairly advantage minority groups for decisions taken and practices upheld by majorities.¹²

In answer to this problem I want to make two points. First, insofar as we are talking about *national* responsibility, and not merely the responsibility of the citizens of a particular state, we may assume that members of the nation share a set of overarching values that are articulated in the public culture, notwithstanding the fact that they may disagree quite radically over many more specific cultural questions. This is simply part of what it means to constitute a nation.¹³ Of course this definitional point would have no interest unless it were true that in the real world we could find nations that fit the definition. But it is indeed true, nor is it hard to understand how the processes that have shaped national identity historically have created populations with overarching values of this kind. The implication is that minority groups within nations do not adhere to beliefs and values that are completely at odds with those of the majority; instead we find areas of overlap, and insofar as the decisions, policies and practices we are discussing reflect those overlapping beliefs and values, it is not wrong to attribute responsibility to members of the minority too.

Second, people may become responsible for the consequences of decisions and so forth as a result of engaging in democratic politics, even

if they find themselves in a minority. Democratic politics works on the basis that individuals or groups win on some issues but lose on others, and in either case are bound to accept the results of the democratic process. They have, for instance, an obligation to abide by laws that they voted against (an obligation that can, however, be overridden if the law is seriously unjust). By the same token, they must share in the responsibility for the decisions that are reached, in the sense of bearing their share of the costs when these decisions turn out to have negative consequences.¹⁴ This is a requirement of fairness: when a group finds itself on the winning side, it benefits from the compliance of the minority who opposed the decision, and so by the same token it can be asked to comply in turn when it is on the losing side. All of this assumes, however, that minorities are not permanent – that the same people do not routinely find themselves on the losing side when decisions are reached. If this happens, the argument that they should be asked to bear the cost of those decisions becomes much less plausible.

My argument, in short, is that nations, and especially *democratic* nations, conform to varying degrees to the two models of collective responsibility I outlined earlier. Their members subscribe to a common public culture, despite individual differences in belief and value, and they participate in mutually beneficial practices whose shape they have a chance to influence. The more strongly these conditions obtain, the more appropriate it is to hold nations responsible for their political actions and decisions, and the consequences that flow from these.

THE LIMITS OF RESPONSIBILITY

Does acceptance of national responsibility mean that global poverty should not be our concern, because it is the people whose lives are poor who are themselves responsible for their own condition? By no means, for reasons we shall come to shortly. What *does* follow, however, is that international inequality may not itself be unjust, when the inequality can be traced back to actions and decisions for which the people in question can properly be held responsible. And indeed this is something that we accept, when our attention is turned away from societies that fall below the decency threshold towards inequalities between comparatively rich nations. It is rarely argued that differences in living standards between, say, the Germans and the Greeks are unjust, because these differences are in part explicable by cultural and political differences between the two nations in question. Such cases are not morally problematic. But

how should we view societies that appear unable to provide their members with the resources to lead decent lives? Should we acknowledge obligations of justice to help them?

There are several reasons why we should. First, it may well be that the conditions for national responsibility do not apply in such cases. I made it clear in the last section that there is a strong link between national responsibility and democratic government. Conversely, people cannot be held responsible for the effects of decisions taken by autocratic rulers that they would have opposed if they had had the opportunity to do so. It would be too neat a solution to say that failures of decency can always be traced back to autocratic government, and therefore that questions of responsibility never arise in practice. Nevertheless, it is not hard to see how democratic mechanisms – political accountability, freedom of the press, and so forth – will encourage governments to act to prevent significant shortfalls of this kind. Sen points out in particular that “no substantial famine has ever occurred in a democratic country – no matter how poor,” and gives plausible reasons why this is so.¹⁵ So it is at least a reasonable presumption that when we encounter gross breaches of the decency standard, we are looking at people who cannot be held responsible for the policies that have brought them to this point.

Second, we need to think carefully about the effects of interaction and interdependence between nations, especially economic interaction. If we take any nation at random and ask the question why its members have the living standards that they do, then the answer is likely to refer not only to the cultural values they espouse and the political decisions they have taken in the past, but also to the impact on them of *other* nations’ actions and decisions. This is an obvious enough point when the external impact takes unjust forms such as economic exploitation. But it is less obvious when the impact takes the form of policies that are damaging to the nation in question, but not in themselves unjust. Consider, for example, the economic position of Cuba, whose poorer citizens were unable, in the 1990s, to buy sufficient food to maintain a nutritionally adequate diet. Our first thought might be that this was the result of Communist economic policy over the previous thirty years, and that since the people had consistently given their support to Castro’s regime, they can legitimately be held responsible for the outcome. But we must surely also consider the impact of the ongoing United States trade embargo, given that before Castro’s revolution more than two-thirds of Cuba’s foreign trade had been with that country, and equally

the withdrawal after 1989 of very substantial trade subsidies from the Soviet Union.¹⁶ We might regard these politically motivated policies as legitimate expressions of national self-determination by the two countries in question; yet given their effects on the Cuban economy, we might also want to attribute some share of responsibility for the deprivation suffered by ordinary Cubans to these two superpowers.

The problem this raises is that attributions of responsibility have to be made against the background of a "normal" state of affairs that is taken for granted. Suppose that I cannot support myself because, although I have been offered several perfectly acceptable jobs, I insist on having a job that is not now available. We would say that I am responsible for my own condition, because we build into the background the assumption that no one else has a responsibility to give me the job that I most prefer. My situation is different from that of someone who has no chance to get a job of any kind. But it may not be so clear how the "normal" state of affairs should be defined. In the case we are considering, is free trade between countries to be taken as the norm, or should we say that each nation is entitled to decide who it does and doesn't wish to trade with, so that if the US decides to embargo Cuba, that is simply a background fact in the light of which Cubans' responsibility for their own economic condition is to be assessed? This question is difficult to answer categorically. What we can perhaps say is that in cases where the actions and policies of powerful state S1 have a severely negative impact on the capabilities of members of relatively powerless state S2, then some share of responsibility must attach to S1, even if the policies themselves were justifiable as a legitimate expression of national self-determination.

So far we have examined two reasons why we may be obliged by justice to support people whose lives are less than decent: one is that they are not themselves responsible for their condition, but the victims of autocratic rule; the other is that the responsibility is only *partly* theirs, since their condition has been significantly affected by the actions of other nations. But what if neither of these reasons applies, and we can attribute poor and barren lives to cultural beliefs and political choices for which the people in question are indeed wholly responsible (unlikely as this scenario might seem)? I believe that even here we remain under an obligation to intervene, though it is an obligation that can be overridden by more stringent obligations to people who are *not* responsible for their condition. This is tantamount to saying that if we have to decide between

respecting people as beings with essential needs and respecting them as responsible agents (to revert to the dilemma that I introduced at the start of the essay), we should choose the former. But note that by parity of reasoning we need not respect the cultural values that led them into this predicament. If we commit resources to bring people who are collectively responsible for their condition to the threshold of decency, we may at the same time mount an assault on the beliefs and the practices that led to them falling beneath it.¹⁷ If we say that in the last resort the sustaining of basic capabilities is more important than the principle of responsibility, we cannot treat as sacrosanct cultures that condemn their followers to lives that fall below that threshold.

In all these cases there remains the problem of how to distribute the responsibility for getting people over the decency threshold. Although currently millions of people worldwide live lives that are less than decent, the wealth of the developed nations is such that there are many possible ways in which the costs of putting this right could be distributed. In these circumstances, it is understandable that potential donor nations should hold back in the hope that the burden can be shifted elsewhere, and the result is that overseas aid budgets are typically only a small fraction of what would be needed to bring people everywhere across the threshold. Clearly, we must look for principles that determine where remedial responsibility should fall.¹⁸ More specifically, we need principles that will connect the members of rich nation A to the members of poor nation B so as to justify our saying that it is A that bears a special responsibility towards B. Such principles exist, but they are plural, and there is no obviously correct way of ranking them. For instance, we might ask how far A is causally responsible for B's present plight as a result of policies pursued by A in the past. Alternatively, we might ask the connected, but different, question how far A can be held *morally* responsible for the condition of B. A third possibility is to ask whether A has particular capacities that other nations do not have to remedy shortfalls in B – capacities due to resource endowment, geographical location and so on. Finally we might ask whether any kind of special relationship exists between A and B – an affinity of language or culture, for example – such that members of A feel a sense of community with those in B. Each of these principles identifies a form of connection between A and B that can ground special remedial responsibilities on A's part, and avoid the situation where, because there are many nations that *could* help B, but none has a

particular reason to act, each holds back in the hope that others will step in first.

Unfortunately, however, the principles cited in the last paragraph may pull in different directions in a particular case. The nation that has played the biggest causal part in bringing B to its present condition may not be well positioned to provide the resources that would now permit members of B to lead decent lives. There is an urgent need to develop international conventions to deal with such conflicts of principle, as well as an institutional structure that is able to apply such conventions, ensuring that impoverished nations do not fall through the net just because no rich nation recognizes a special responsibility towards them. I shall not try to describe such an institutional structure, since my concern is with the underlying principles of responsibility rather than with their implementation. But the underlying aim should be clear. Nations already acknowledge, through their relief and development programmes, that they have some responsibility to remedy global poverty. Institutional cooperation would allow them to coordinate their efforts by allocating specific tasks to specific countries where appropriate, or pooling resources in cases where no nation bears a special responsibility for the condition of the B in question.

My aim in this essay has been to show that we can take the idea of national responsibility seriously and still recognize substantial obligations towards the world's poor. On the one hand, I have rejected visions of global justice that require some form of global equality of opportunity. On the other hand, I have dismissed the claim that national responsibility entails looking after one's own and nothing more. We can establish international standards of decency that entail an obligation to provide support for people whose lives are currently less than adequate by those standards. It is not wrong to ask how far the people in question are responsible for their own condition – the idea of collective responsibility makes sense, I have argued – but we should not jump too quickly to the conclusion that they must be. And even if, after investigation, it turns out that they *are* responsible, that may affect the way the obligation is discharged, but it does not nullify it. A just world, on this view, would be one in which the principle of national responsibility was given full play, and which would therefore exhibit considerable diversity (including diversity of living standards), but in which remedial responsibilities were also fully acknowledged, so that no one was condemned to live a life that fell below the threshold of decency.

NOTES

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¹ I have looked at some of the evidence relevant to this question in D. Miller, "Popular Beliefs about Social Justice: a Comparative Approach," in S. Svallfors, ed., *In the Eye of the Beholder* (Umea: Bank of Sweden, 1995).

² For defences of this view, see B. Barry, "Humanity and Justice in Global Perspective" and "Justice as Reciprocity," in B. Barry, *Liberty and Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); T. Pogge, "An Egalitarian Law of Peoples," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 23 (1994), 195–224; S. Caney, "Global Equality of Opportunity and the Sovereignty of States," in A. Coates, ed., *International Justice* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

³ In fact there are difficulties with this supposition, arising from the fact that in a culturally plural world there may be no metric in terms of which we could determine whether an international distribution of resources is equal or not, as I have argued in "Justice and Global Inequality," in A. Hurrell and N. Woods, eds., *Inequality, Globalization, and World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). But I set those difficulties aside in order to make the point that follows.

⁴ Compare here John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), section 16, and my own earlier discussion in "Justice and Global Inequality." It might seem that the observations made here pose no challenge to global equality of opportunity, since the latter idea permits inequalities that can be traced back to values and choices. However the values and choices that equality of opportunity accommodates are always *individual* values and choices, whereas I am pointing in the text to resource differences that stem from the *collective* decisions and practices of different peoples.

⁵ I say "some of the core requirements" because I do not aim here to give a complete account. A full theory of international justice would have to deal with several other questions, including the issue of the terms on which members of different political communities should interact economically with one another, the issue of territorial rights, the issue of compensation for acts of historical injustice and so forth. My focus here is on what is owed as a matter of justice to people who are inadequately endowed with freedoms, opportunities and resources.

⁶ This idea has been spelt out by Sen in a number of works, including *The Standard of Living* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); *Inequality Reexamined* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), ch. 3; "Capability and Well-Being," in M. Nussbaum and A. Sen, eds., *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press,

1993); *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), esp. chs. 3-4. It has been used in the construction of the Human Development Index and the Human Poverty Index featured in the *Human Development Reports* issued annually by the United Nations Development Programme.

7 Sen, *Development as Freedom*, pp. 99-103.

8 One should not, however, conclude too quickly that women go along with dominant male views about their not needing certain capabilities. See the powerful argument advanced by Martha Nussbaum in *Women and Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) that poor women in India have learned to value the capabilities that Nussbaum takes as central to an adequate human life.

9 In saying this I do not mean to imply that every human being engages in all the activities. Some choose not to raise families, for instance.

10 I consider these two models at greater length in "Holding Nations Responsible," *Ethics*, forthcoming.

11 Distinguishing between what I here call "normal processes of socialisation" and the coercive inducing of beliefs and values is admittedly difficult. There is a spectrum of cases, at one end of which we find liberal societies in which people are encouraged through the education system to think for themselves, there are a range of religious and other cultural options to choose from, and so forth, at the other end there are societies with an officially promoted ideology, religious or secular, where stiff penalties applied to anyone who expresses dissent in thought or deed. In between we find a range of traditional societies. In these intermediate cases, we need to make judgments about how far people "could have thought otherwise" and therefore how far they can reasonably be held responsible for their beliefs and values.

12 Minority groups will be penalised in case the decision or policy they favour would have brought them a larger share of resources, and unfairly advantaged in case it would have brought them a smaller share.

13 See my discussion of nations and national identity in D. Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), ch. 2.

14 It is important to keep in mind here that the form of collective responsibility we are discussing is responsibility for the costs that follow from a group's or a nation's following a certain course of action, not moral responsibility in the narrower sense that is connected to praise and blame. It would clearly be wrong to hold a group morally responsible, in the sense of blameable, for a policy that they had opposed in a public forum. But it may not be wrong, according to my argument, to hold them responsible, along with other groups on the majority side, meaning that they may be held liable for their fair share of the costs associated with the policy. For a fuller analysis of these different senses of responsibility, and of the importance of keeping them disentangled, see my "Distributing Responsibilities," *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 9 (2001), 453-71.

15 Sen, *Development as Freedom*, p. 51. See also J. Dreze and A. Sen, *Hunger and Public Action* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

16 The impact of these policies is well described in S. E. Eckstein, *Back to the Future: Cuba under Castro* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

17 "Mount an assault" metaphorically rather than physically - I mean that we are justified in using whatever carrots and sticks will lead the people in question to adapt their culture so that it allows them to lead decent lives, so long as the methods we use do not themselves violate their basic rights.

18 I draw here on my much fuller discussion in "Distributing Responsibilities."