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A SYNTHESIS OF PETER SINGER'S UTILITARIAN COSMOPOLITANISM AND PAUL TAYLOR'S HIERARCHY OF INTERESTS: TOWARDS THE DRAFTING OF A TEMPLATE FOR GLOBAL DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

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Introduction

The jury is out on whether or not there is a viable path to achieving global justice. There will always be optimists and pessimists and those somewhere in between. One group of optimists tend to paint rather too easily a utopian picture of a future when there will be some global super-state with police powers to ensure the universal observance of justice. It wouldn't matter anymore which country or economic system one lives in. One would have all his or her basic rights guaranteed and protected, and one will have a significant exercise of the power of self-determination. Another group of optimists paint rather too naively a utopian future global order where despite the absence of a global political structure all the nations will come to the aid (each according to its current ability) of any poor country at any given time, with absolutely no strings attached, so that there will never be any long-term poverty anywhere anymore. There will be no more poverty generated by unjust global economic policies. Any natural calamity like earthquakes, droughts, and cyclones will not have

long term negative economic effects in any country because every other country in the world is ready to give assistance *gratis et amore*.

The pessimists (some of them would classify themselves as “realists”) do not think justice is possible at all in the global level. One group says that the idea of a global super-state is undesirable or at least unrealizable even if it should be desirable. There is too much price to pay, they say, for such a state of affairs. Nations would have to give up their national (social, religious, cultural, etc.) identities in order to be subsumed into the super-state. And history has shown that national identities are such important components of people’s personal quest for meaning that they are willing to wage war against anyone who would threaten to suppress them. Thus, for the pessimists, the nation-state remains to be the proper locus for and enforcer of justice. Properly speaking, therefore, it is impossible to have justice, or injustice, for that matter, in the global sphere. What is out there in the international scene is a kind of Hobbesian free-for-all where nations are in perpetual suspicion of one another. Those who can would pile up nuclear weapons as deterrent against other nuclear-capable superpowers. Treaties are signed whenever they favor the interests of the nation-state, but are readily broken when doing so favors the state’s self-interests.

Moreover, according to the pessimists, whatever aid is given by any rich country to a developing country is always a Trojan horse. It always is a way of getting something more valuable in return. It is always the case that what a donor country gets in return from the donee country far surpasses in value the aid given. The trade deals (e.g., unlimited free market deals that bring in foreign products that eventually render local businesses unable to compete against) which the donor country forces the beneficiary country to sign would always be in favor of the interests of the rich country. But the developing

country has no choice because it has to have an immediate solution to its current economic woes. In short, there is never any aid without vested interests. And any global justice agenda that calls on the conscience of rich nations to apportion some of their wealth to poor nations purely from the goodness of their hearts is, for the pessimists, plain naïveté.

This is the situation the world is in at the moment. There is way too much inequality. The rich are becoming richer and the poor are becoming poorer by the day. The problem is then thrown to political philosophers: what solution should there be? In fairness to those who have tried to come up with a solution, some of the proposals have in theory been very valid philosophically. The problem is always in the actual implementation. The actual implementation in the real world is obviously a collaboration of many sectors, including political scientists, politicians, policy-makers, educators, and religious and moral leaders, to mention a few. Many of the solutions proposed by political philosophers are too hastily dismissed as unrealistic and unworkable, too good on paper but too difficult to translate into real life. Such was the fate of John Rawls' thought experiments on the original position involving individuals in one nation-state in his *Theory of Justice*. Such also is the fate of Rawls' second original position involving representatives of nation-states. The rationality of Rawls' theoretical proposal as a fair way to come up with just economic rules is well-established, but its possibilities have never been really exhausted in practical life.

Proposals from political philosophers, such as Hillel Steiner, that involve the creation and maintenance of a "world fund" have also been considered as a viable path to the global justice aspiration. And yet, like Rawls' proposals, they, too, have been criticized as well-meaning but too idealistic and naïve about the nature of human beings and, by extension, about the nature of nation-states.

Peter Singer's Utilitarian Cosmopolitanism: The Principle and Its Promise

A very important contributor to the discussion on global justice is Peter Singer, a representative of cosmopolitanism. His 1971 essay "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" appeals to the conscientious observance of the following moral principle: "*If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.*"¹ It would be a pity if Singer's contribution to the field of global justice would just be thrown into the ash heap of history. It is appropriate here to say of Singer's principle what Gilbert K. Chesterton once said of the Christian ideal: "It has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried." It is the contention of this paper that Singer's principle holds great promise if it will be heeded by more and more individuals and nation-states after we can, hopefully, provide it with one viable path to proceed.

Take a look again at Singer's principle stated above. By the phrase "without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance" Singer means, "without causing anything else comparably bad to happen, or doing something that is wrong in itself, or failing to promote some moral good, comparable in significance to the bad thing that we can prevent."² The strong version, which Singer thinks to be the correct one, obliges the affluent to give to the famished even to the point of marginal utility, i.e., that point where a further giving would already cause the giver as much suffering as the one the giver is seeking to relieve.

In the article, Singer compromises that even a weaker modified version of the principle would still require a lot of lifestyle changes from affluent peoples and would go a long way, if heeded, towards solving the problem of global injustice (such as, in his example, the inequality of there being famine

and death by starvation in one country whereas the rest of the world did not do anything other than give a few token relief initiatives, while continuing their consumerist splurges). The weaker version states only that “if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it.”³ Under this version, the giver may consider it morally significant not to reach the marginal utility point, and so the giver doesn’t have to give to the point of marginal utility as is required by the stronger version. Singer’s famous example is that a rich country coming to the aid of a poor one suffering from famine and starvation is like a grown-up man chancing upon a boy about to drown in a shallow pond. Since, saving the boy really doesn’t involve the sacrifice of anything morally significant (i.e., the man will only get his clothes wet by wading in the shallow water to pick up the boy), the man ought, morally, to do so. The relative values of the goods being compared are hardly problematic in the obvious cases such as in the example – the boy getting drowned is undoubtedly a greater evil than the grown-up’s clothes getting wet. There is a problem, though, when it comes to the less obvious cases.

Singer’s article, however, doesn’t give a detailed account of the dynamics of comparing “goods of comparable moral importance” And so, some questions remain: How may we judge more systematically which goods are morally comparable in importance with certain other goods? By what criteria may we judge something to be morally significant at all? How may we determine that something has greater or lesser moral importance? Moreover, in cases of moral uncertainty about the proper placement of certain goods in the hierarchy of moral importance – especially as the global movement of goods involves various nation-states that attach different valuations to the same items – who is going to be the arbiter regarding obligations of justice?

Objective of the Paper: An Inner Detailing of Singer's Proposal

The purpose of this paper is to expand Singer's proposal so that there may be some specific guidelines for determining the relative moral importance of goods. Once certain goods are reasonably placed already in a hierarchy based on these guidelines, Singer's principle can then be more systematically invoked to chart moral obligations based on two considerations: the interests/capacities of the giver and the interests/necessities of the recipient.

To help us arrive at a working template, I propose to borrow the categories of interest in environmental philosopher Paul Taylor's hierarchy of interests.⁴ The initial diagram below is inspired by the quantitative ethics of rational ethicist Stijn Bruers.⁵ The resulting template (developed from Bruers' diagram⁶) shall use Taylor's hierarchy and chart the different levels of interests of impoverished recipients (individuals or nation-states) as well as determine the moral obligations of affluent potential givers (individuals or nation-states) based on their own capacities, following Singer's principle that "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it." Hopefully, the template, when filled up conscientiously by both givers and recipients (according to a kind of rational consensus?), will outline what impoverished people/s may reasonably expect from affluent ones and what the latter owe as an obligation of justice to the former.

Paul Taylor's Hierarchy of Interests

Paul Taylor provides us with a very useful system of classifying our interests. In general, our interests can be classified into basic and non-basic interests. These are then

refined into at least four categories of decreasing moral importance: vital, basic, strong, and trivial interests.⁷

Vital interests are those interests that all human beings take in having goods that are absolutely essential to survive. Examples of these goods would be the food needed by a human being to last another day, water that is clean enough not to cause diseases, clothing that is needed to survive the cold and the heat. Moreover, a vital necessity is one where there is moral certainty on the part of the potential giver that if help is not coming soon, the suffering person would die.

Basic interests are those interests that most human beings take in having goods that are of prime importance to life, though not absolutely essential in order to survive. For example, most humans have a basic interest in literacy, though they can get by without it. Most humans also take a basic interest in having ample living space, though they can get by with less. Those living in refugee camps, or in overcrowded slums or squatters' areas, have a basic interest in finding more humane quarters where they won't be cramped together like sardines. While ample living space is a basic interest for human beings, it is not vital like the interest starving people in famine-stricken areas take in having food and water.

Strong interests are those that many human beings take in procuring certain goods or states of affairs that are highly preferable, though not a basic one. The procurement of these states of affairs is already over and above their basic interest. Many human beings, for example, after having their basic interest in procuring ample living space satisfied already, take a strong interest in aesthetically pleasing surroundings.

Trivial interests are those that a number of human beings take in procuring certain superfluous goods or states of affairs as a matter of personal taste. Environmentalists frequently cite as example the ecologically unfortunate trivial interests rich people take in wearing fur coats. Another trivia is the interest in

eating *pate de foie gras* (a rich savory paste made from fatted goose liver) in exotic resorts and restaurants. Other trivial interests include the wearing of expensive diamonds, the hobby of collecting luxurious sports cars, and the accumulation of expensive gadgets way beyond what is necessary.

Thus far we have the four categories of interests from the point of view of the consumer or the potential recipient. Now, we may consider the capacities or the resources of the giver based on those four categories of interests. The ideal potential giver, for his part, enjoys *vital* resources, *basic* resources, resources needed to satisfy *strong* interests, and resources needed to satisfy *trivial* interests.

The Template for Global Distributive Justice: First Draft

As an initial template to roughly present a list of moral obligations based on Singer's principle that *if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it*, we have the following: (Take note that the model here represents a continuum where there may be no clear cut-off points between vital and basic interests, or between strong and trivial interests. Just the same, the question of vagueness in the cut-off points is a broader philosophical issue that I don't intend to discuss here. Nor does it make the model fail, simply on that account, as a guideline in determining moral obligations and reasonable expectations of the transfer of goods. The vertical line represents the continuum of resources/capacities of the potential giver to satisfy his interests here presented in decreasing moral importance the lower the line goes down. The horizontal line represents the continuum of the interests/needs of the potential recipient here presented in decreasing moral importance the farther the line goes left. While the O's represent the giver's moral obligations, the X's represent the

giver's non-obligations to give from his category of resources to satisfy the recipient's corresponding levels of interests.)

Interests of the	T	S	B	V	
	X	X	X	X	V
	X	X	X	O	B
	X	X	O	O	S
	X	O	O	O	T
					Resources of the

Table 1. Template for Moral Obligation

Thus, for example, following Singer's principle and using the hierarchy of interests of Paul Taylor, we can now more or less clearly say that to satisfy a recipient's trivial interests the giver is under no obligation (X) to give from the resources he has allotted for the satisfaction of his own trivial interests (and much less from those he has allotted for the satisfaction of his more morally important interests), since the sacrifice of his trivial interests would be morally comparable to the unsatisfied trivial interests of the recipient – whatever those trivial interests may be.

Likewise, no person or nation-state is under obligation to sacrifice the resources necessary for the sufficient satisfaction of his/her/its vital interests in order to satisfy the vital interests of another person or nation-state. But this person or nation-state has the obligation (O) to sacrifice the resources intended

for the satisfaction of his/her/its trivial, strong, and even basic interests if that is what it takes to satisfy the poor person's or country's vital interests.

Onora O'Neill rightly describes Singer's utilitarian theory as leading to interventionist conclusions. In O'Neill's account, Singer points out that:

[C]ontributions to famine relief, even if they amount to a large proportion of our income – say, 50 percent – do not sacrifice anything of moral importance comparable to that of the hunger they relieve. Hunger and starvation cause far greater suffering than the loss of minor luxuries: compare the results of doing without half your food with the results of doing without a car. So ... the prosperous, even the modestly prosperous, ought to help feed the hungry and to give up their affluence until they have so reduced their own standard of living that any further giving would sacrifice 'something of comparable moral importance.'⁸

Moreover, the lower the interest in the level of moral importance on the side of the giver, the higher becomes the obligation he/she/it has to sacrifice the resources intended for the satisfaction of that interest to answer the vital interests of the starving recipient. Hence, for example, to satisfy the vital interests of starving children in Africa to receive food, water, and medication, rich collectors of luxurious sports cars in rich countries are morally obliged to give up their expensive hobbies, which obviously are very, very trivial interests, and make the corresponding transfer of resources.

More systematically, we present the following chart: (See next page).

If the interests of the recipient is:	The giver is to sacrifice the resources intended for the satisfaction of his/her/its:
VITAL	NOT OBLIGED	VITAL INTERESTS
	OBLIGED	BASIC INTERESTS
	STRONGLY OBLIGED	STRONG INTERESTS
	VERY STRONGLY OBLIGED	TRIVIAL INTERESTS
BASIC	NOT OBLIGED	VITAL INTERESTS
	NOT OBLIGED	BASIC INTERESTS
	OBLIGED	STRONG INTERESTS
	STRONGLY OBLIGED	TRIVIAL INTERESTS
STRONG	NOT OBLIGED	VITAL INTERESTS
	NOT OBLIGED	BASIC INTERESTS
	NOT OBLIGED	STRONG INTERESTS
	OBLIGED (general obligation)	TRIVIAL INTERESTS
TRIVIAL	NOT OBLIGED	VITAL INTERESTS
	NOT OBLIGED	BASIC INTERESTS
	NOT OBLIGED	STRONG INTERESTS
	NOT OBLIGED	TRIVIAL INTERESTS

Table 2. Interests of the Recipients and Obligations of the Givers

Problems in the Hierarchy of Interests

Now, many of the goods so far mentioned that we take vital interests in having (e.g., food, water, and clothing needed to survive) are hardly problematic since our moral instincts can very readily affirm their absolute necessity for the survival of every human being. However, in the lower-level interests, gray areas abound. For instance, in pursuing a high school or a college education, are we satisfying basic or strong interests? Who is to decide? Can owning similar goods, say, a second car, be a basic, a strong, or a trivial interest depending upon such

factors as a person's work, station in life, or geographical challenges? Who is to arbitrate?

In the obvious cases, a global consensus may be easily reached and laws enacted by representatives of nations coming together for the purpose of identifying and assigning certain interests their rightful place in the hierarchy of interests based on our template – the global distributive justice template, we may call it.

In the less obvious cases, it may seem that all that can be relied on is the personal good will of persons and the collective conscience of a nation-state. Nevertheless, there is hope that representatives of nations (a multi-disciplinary delegation of philosophers, politicians, policy-makers, religious thinkers, economists, financial experts, political scientists, and other social scientists) can regularly come together to draft the global distributive justice template, which must, of course, be regularly updated. In the gray areas surrounding the moral comparability of certain interests, there may be a necessity to extend the discussion and the debate before a global rational consensus can be arrived at.

Conclusion

The paper has shown, hopefully, that Peter Singer's proposal in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" holds great promise in minimizing global inequalities. Those who have prematurely dismissed Singer's appeal to a very global-justice-potent moral imperative (namely, that of doing something to prevent something bad from happening if doing so involves no sacrifice of something of comparative moral value) as too idealistic but devoid of a viable path to proceed may take a second look at it. The paper has plotted only one practical course (among many possible courses, I suppose) of implementation of Singer's theory. Here I made use of Paul Taylor's concept of hierarchy of interests to provide what I

thought were missing inner mechanisms of the theory. I have shown that the task of comparing the relative moral importance of goods/interests and the resources needed to satisfy them – so as to come up with a more systematic articulation of moral obligations and reasonable expectations – need not be a daunting one after all. I ended my presentation by envisioning a regular global gathering of the best and most conscientious representatives of nation-states to discuss, debate, and draft the global distributive justice template – and continually update it – via a global rational consensus.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (Spring, 1972): 231.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Although Paul Taylor is famous for his environmental ethics, his concept of hierarchy of interests will here be applied only to human ethics. After all, as he puts it, there is "a structural symmetry ... between the two theories, one of human ethics and one of environmental ethics." Paul W. Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011), 47.

⁵ Stijn Bruers, "A Quantitative Model for a Theory of Justice: Part I: Derivation and Implications of the Quasi-Maximin Principle," retrieved 02 June 2016 from the World Wide Web: <https://stijnbruers.wordpress.com/2010/10/17/a-model-for-a-theory-of-justice/>.

⁶ Stijn Bruers, "The Basic Right," retrieved 02 June 2016 from the World Wide Web: <https://stijnbruers.wordpress.com/2011/12/25/the-basic-right/>.

⁷ J. Baird Callicott, "The Search for an Environmental Ethic," in *Matters of Life and Death: New Introductory Essays in Moral Philosophy*, 3rd ed., ed. Tom Regan (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 356. Here, it is noted again, while Taylor intends these categories of interests to have a wider inter-species application so that humans may know what they owe as a matter of moral obligation to non-human species, our present application is limited to the evaluation and classification of human interests only.

⁸ Onora O'Neill, "Ending World Hunger," in *Matters of Life and Death: New Introductory Essays in Moral Philosophy*, 3rd ed., ed. Tom Regan (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 252.