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## AGAINST GLOBAL EGALITARIANISM<sup>★</sup>

(Received 14 May 2004; accepted in revised form 3 June 2004)

**ABSTRACT.** This article attacks the view that global justice should be understood in terms of a global principle of equality. The principle mainly discussed is global equality of opportunity – the idea that people of similar talent and motivation should have equivalent opportunity sets no matter to which society they belong. I argue first that in a culturally plural world we have no neutral way of measuring opportunity sets. I then suggest that the most commonly offered defences of global egalitarianism – the cosmopolitan claim that human lives have equal value, the argument that a person's nationality is a morally arbitrary characteristic, and the more empirical claim that relationships among fellow-nationals are no longer special in a way that matters for justice – are all defective. If we fall back on the idea of equality as a default principle, then we have to recognize that pursuing global equality of opportunity systematically would leave no space for national self-determination. Finally, I ask whether global inequality might be objectionable for reasons independent of justice, and argue that the main reason for concern is the inequalities of *power* that are likely to emerge in a radically unequal world.

**KEY WORDS:** cosmopolitanism, culture, equality of opportunity, global justice, national self-determination, power

### I

In this article I want to set out some reasons why equality should not play a foundational role in our thinking about global justice. Much recent political philosophy has, I believe, been mesmerised by the idea of equality, to the extent that it is often taken for granted that all valid principles of distributive justice must be egalitarian in form. Although this is an error, there are good reasons for giving equality a central place in thinking about *social* justice, justice applied to the basic structure of self-governing political communities, of which

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<sup>★</sup> I am very grateful to Gillian Brock and Kok-Chor Tan for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

nation-states are the main examples in the contemporary world.<sup>2</sup> It is sometimes taken for granted that principles of justice that apply within such communities must also apply to the world as a whole, albeit with a different set of institutions to put the principles into practice. Global justice is simply social justice stretched outwards across national borders, and insofar as the latter can be captured by a suitably tailored principle of equality, this same principle can be used to define justice at a global level.

In arguing against this position, I should not be taken to mean that we should not be concerned about global inequality. As everybody knows, the extent of global inequality, whether measured in terms of per capita incomes or more sophisticated measures of human advantage and disadvantage such as those proposed by Amartya Sen, is both striking and shocking, and this is relevant to our thinking about global justice in a number of ways. If, for instance, we think that everyone's basic human rights include a right to a minimal level of material subsistence, which for many millions of people currently remains unfulfilled, then the scale of global inequality will determine how much those who live in rich countries would have to sacrifice to fulfil this right – the greater the inequality, the less significant, in human terms, would the resource transfers be for the rich. Or again, large economic inequalities between nations almost inevitably determine the outcome of international negotiations, trade deals and so forth, with the result that richer nations are able to set terms of interaction that work to their further advantage. For these and other reasons, we may well conclude that a just world would also be a world with far less inequality in it than ours. But here our concern with equality is derivative, not foundational. Global inequality matters because of its effects, or because of what it tells us about the costs of achieving justice, but not because it is intrinsically unjust.

Ridding ourselves of global egalitarianism would enable us to focus our attention more directly on global injustice and how to respond to it, for instance on what is to be done about the ongoing widespread violation of basic human rights, or on how to induce states to agree on measures to stop the wholesale destruction of the natural environment. In abandoning global equality, we would not be giving up on a radical political agenda – far from it. We would,

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<sup>2</sup> Central, but not exclusive. See my defence of a pluralistic conception of social justice in David Miller, *Principles of Social Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), Chapters 2 and 11.

though, be abandoning a utopian vision of a world in which, as one commentator has put it, “a child growing up in rural Mozambique would be statistically as likely as the child of a senior executive at a Swiss bank to reach the position of the latter’s parent” (this is the equality of opportunity version of global egalitarianism, which I will discuss shortly).<sup>3</sup> My main objection to this view is that it is based on a mistaken principle, not that it is politically utopian, but I also think that making equality our aim at the global level will push justice so far out of reach that most people would abandon the effort to achieve it. This may, I conjecture, explain why eminent philosophers like Charles Beitz and Thomas Pogge, both of whom originally defended a broadly Rawlsian version of global egalitarianism, have subsequently lowered their theoretical sights without reneging on their practical radicalism – Beitz now preferring to stress the derivative rather than intrinsic arguments for greater global equality, Pogge hinging his case for global economic transformation on the principle of non-violation of human rights.<sup>4</sup> Neither philosopher, to my knowledge, has explicitly abandoned global egalitarianism. They prefer to underline how far it is possible to travel politically starting from less contentious premises. Others, however, continue to espouse global principles of equality, even though much of their argument about global justice turns out in practice to rest on other premises, such as the human right to subsistence.<sup>5</sup> So the underlying issue remains unresolved, and worthy of serious attention.

Since my aim here is primarily critical, I shall not set out at any length the alternative, non-egalitarian, conception of global justice

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<sup>3</sup> Darrel Moellendorf, *Cosmopolitan Justice* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2002), p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> See Charles Beitz, “Does Global Inequality Matter?” in Thomas Pogge (ed.), *Global Justice* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), pp. 106–122; Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002). Both had argued in earlier publications for the global application of Rawlsian principles of distributive justice – see Charles Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), Part III; and Thomas Pogge, *Realising Rawls* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), Part III.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Simon Caney, “Cosmopolitan Justice and Equalizing Opportunities,” in Thomas Pogge (ed.), *Global Justice* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), pp.123–144; Simon Caney, “Global Equality of Opportunity and the Sovereignty of States,” in Anthony Coates (ed.), *International Justice* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp.130–149; Moellendorf, *Cosmopolitan Justice*, Chapter. 4; Kok-Chor Tan, *Toleration, Diversity, and Global Justice* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), Chapter 7.

that I favour. But, in brief, I see it as having three main requirements: the obligation to respect basic human rights world-wide; the obligation to refrain from exploiting vulnerable communities and individuals; and the obligation to provide all communities with the opportunity to achieve self-determination and social justice.<sup>6</sup> This is not a complete conception, because it needs to be filled out with principles indicating how the accompanying responsibilities should be allocated, given that very often there are several agents (e.g., richer states) capable of discharging them.<sup>7</sup> But I introduce the requirements in order to indicate what a conception of global justice that does not demand that individuals should be made equal along some dimension might look like. To compare it with global egalitarianism, we need to specify the latter in greater detail, and to this task I now turn.

## II

To assess global egalitarianism, we must avoid loose definitions such that any policy or institution whose effect is to benefit the world's poor or to narrow the gap between rich and poor counts as egalitarian. Such policies and institutions may be supported from a number of different perspectives, so our willingness to endorse them cannot be counted in favour of global egalitarianism specifically. Instead, I want to restrict global egalitarianism to those principles that present equality in some respect between individual people across the world as having intrinsic value. One important subset of these principles will be principles of egalitarian *justice*: principles holding that global equality between individuals along some dimension – resources or opportunities, say – is required by justice. My main focus will be on such principles. But since it is possible to value equality for reasons independent of justice, I also want to explore whether there might be a case for global egalitarianism that takes this form.

It follows, to underline the point just made, that policies aimed at securing human rights worldwide, or policies that give priority to

<sup>6</sup> This conception is spelt out more fully in David Miller, "Justice and Global Inequality," in Andrew Hurrell and Ngaire Woods (eds.), *Inequality, Globalization, and World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 187–210; and in David Miller, "National Self-Determination and Global Justice," in David Miller (ed.), *Citizenship and National Identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), pp. 161–179.

<sup>7</sup> On this issue, see David Miller "Distributing Responsibilities," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 9 (2001), pp. 453–471.

people whose material standard of living is very low, are not in themselves egalitarian policies, although of course they can be pursued as one part of an egalitarian strategy. They are not egalitarian because their goal is not to achieve equality as such along any dimension. Of course in a world in which human rights were universally protected, people would be equal in that respect, but this is consistent with some having more than others along the dimensions that the rights capture. Thus if people have a right to a subsistence income, protecting that right is consistent with allowing significant inequalities of income above the subsistence level. This is a familiar point, but it is worth repeating given that so much writing on global justice seems to slide back and forth between egalitarian principles and others whose underlying logic is very different.

The version of global egalitarianism that I shall examine in greatest detail is *global equality of opportunity*. This has been defended by several authors, and is in any case one of the more plausible contenders in the field. It holds that people of similar talent and similar motivation should have the same life chances (in particular access to educational and job opportunities and the rewards they bring) no matter which society they were born into. This is less demanding than the principle that people should have the same opportunities regardless of their talents, since it allows that differences of ability may affect people's life chances, and it can be seen as a global version of John Rawls' principle of "fair equality of opportunity."<sup>8</sup> Although we are some way from achieving fair equality of opportunity in domestic contexts, it is far from being a utopian aspiration, and it has had some effect on public policy. So in choosing to assess global equality of opportunity, I hope to have selected a version of global egalitarianism that is not obviously a straw man.

So what, more specifically, does global equality of opportunity require? Does it require, to begin with, that people with the same talent and motivation should have *identical* opportunity sets no matter which society they are born into? This seems to be the implication of Moellendorf's statement, cited earlier, that "a child growing up in rural Mozambique would be statistically as likely as the child of a senior executive at a Swiss bank to reach the position of the latter's parent." But surely such a requirement would be too strong. It would, for instance, require unlimited rights of migration coupled with

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<sup>8</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), Sections, 12, 14, 46.

unrestricted admission to citizenship, given that some positions, such as chief executive of *Credit Suisse*, or President of the United States of America, presuppose membership of particular societies. Moreover, even leaving aside the difficulty of being able to apply formally for certain positions, the child from rural Mozambique would be less fluent in German, French or Italian than his Swiss counterpart, and on that ground alone less likely to succeed in the competition to become a Swiss banker.<sup>9</sup> So unless advocates of global equality of opportunity envisage a borderless world in which everyone speaks Esperanto, it is more plausible to interpret the principle as requiring *equivalent* opportunity sets. It would be satisfied provided the child from rural Mozambique had the same chance to attain an executive post in a bank somewhere, perhaps in Mozambique itself, with the same salary and other benefits as the position aimed at by the (equally talented and motivated) child of a Swiss banker.

By taking this specific case, we can understand what it would mean for two opportunity sets to be equivalent but not identical. But now consider more fully how we might apply this idea. In order to decide whether two opportunity sets are equivalent, we have to apply some kind of metric, and the metric we use can either be finer-grained or broader-grained. In the case just discussed, we found that the broader-grained metric “opportunity to become chief executive of a national bank” was preferable to the finer-grained “opportunity to become chief executive of a Swiss bank.” We don’t think that the Mozambiquean child is disadvantaged in any significant way by having a lesser opportunity to head a Swiss bank so long as he has a greater opportunity than the Swiss child to head a similar bank in Mozambique. So let us now consider, more generally, how fine-grained or broad-grained our metric of equality should be. If we make it too fine-grained, then we will get lots of meaningless results like the one just mentioned – equalities and inequalities that just do

<sup>9</sup> This issue is raised by Bernard Boxill in “Global Equality of Opportunity and National Integrity,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 5 (1987), pp. 143–168. Boxill discusses the implications of cultural diversity for global equality of opportunity without distinguishing as sharply as I would wish between culture’s role in defining “success” and culture’s role in motivating people to strive for success, however defined. In the present discussion I am bracketing the issue of motivation by defining equal opportunity as opportunity for people of similar talent and motivation. It may well be the case that children in rural Mozambique are not taught to aspire to be bank executives, but for purposes of argument I am assuming that we have a child with the appropriate motivation, and asking under what circumstances such a child could be judged to have equal opportunities with his or her Swiss counterpart.

not matter because they are too specific to engage our ethical attention. But if we try to make it as broad-grained as possible, then we run into controversy about how, if at all, different components of our metric should be evaluated relative to one another.<sup>10</sup>

Let me attempt to make this clearer through an example. Suppose we have two relatively isolated villages, broadly similar in size and general composition. Suppose that village *A* has a football pitch but no tennis court, and village *B* has a tennis court but no football pitch. Do members of the two communities have equal opportunities or not? In the morally relevant sense I think that they do: football pitches and tennis courts seem to fall naturally into the broader category “sporting facilities,” and measured in terms of this metric the two communities are more or less equally endowed. It would seem morally perverse for members of *B* to complain of injustice by using “access to football pitches” as the relevant metric. But now suppose also that village *A* possesses a school but no church, and village *B* possesses a church but no school. Can we still say that people in these two villages enjoy equal opportunities? I think almost all of us would say that they do not. We think that the opportunities provided by a school and a church are just different, that if someone were to suggest a metric such as “access to enlightenment” in terms of which the two villages should be judged as equally endowed, this would just be a piece of sophistry. It is also worth noticing that while most of us would judge that the villagers in *A* were better off by virtue of having a village school, those who thought that having a church was more important would *also* resist the idea that there was some overarching metric in terms of which the two villages could be judged. They would not think that the religious deprivation suffered by people in *A* could somehow be compensated for by their educational advantages.

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<sup>10</sup> Replying to Boxill’s concern about cultural diversity, Simon Caney suggests the following: “Global equality of opportunity requires that persons (of equal ability and motivation) have equal opportunities to attain an equal number of positions of a commensurate standard of living” (“Cosmopolitan Justice and Equalizing Opportunities,” p. 130). This, however, is simultaneously too narrow and too vague. It is too narrow in focussing exclusively on opportunities to attain jobs; and it is too vague when it uses the metric “a commensurate standard of living” to compare them. What does this mean? Does it refer simply to salary, perhaps adjusted to take account of differences in purchasing power? Or does it mean “standard of living” in a much wider sense, in which case we would need to know how the different components that make up someone’s life are to be weighed against each other? For a penetrating critique of Caney’s view, see Gillian Brock, “The Difference Principle, Equality of Opportunity, and Cosmopolitan Justice” (unpublished).

Now the question is: how are we able to judge that in the football pitch/tennis court case there is no significant inequality between *A* and *B*, whereas in the school/church case there is significant inequality? The answer must be that we have cultural understandings that tell us that football pitches and tennis courts are naturally substitutable as falling under the general rubric of sporting facilities, whereas schools and churches are just different kinds of things, such that you cannot compensate people for not having access to one by giving them access to the other. The cultural understandings tell us that the broader-grained “access to sporting facilities” is a better metric than the finer-grained “access to football pitches” while the finer-grained “access to schools” is a better metric than the broader-grained “access to enlightenment” which I suggested is what someone would need to invent if they wanted to argue that the two villages were equally endowed in the second case.

If we look at how this question is answered within nation-states – in other words at how the general idea of equal opportunity is cashed out in terms of more concrete forms of equality, then what we find is that a number of specific types of resource and opportunity are singled out as significant, and these are not regarded as substitutable. Included in the list would be personal security, education, health care, mobility, and so on. Finer-grained distinctions within these categories are not regarded as relevant. So, for instance, while it is regarded as an essential part of the educational package that every child should have the opportunity to learn foreign languages, it is not regarded as a source of inequality if one school offers Russian and another offers Italian. Mobility opportunities might mean underground trains for some people and rural buses for others, and so forth. At the same time, any attempt to use a broader-grained metric – to suggest, for instance, that poorer health facilities could be compensated by better educational facilities when opportunities are measured – would be strongly resisted. The public culture marks education and health out as different kinds of goods, in respect of each of which citizens should have equal opportunities.

What happens if we try to carry this understanding of equality across to the global level? We run into serious difficulties created by the fact that we can no longer rely upon a common set of cultural understandings to tell us which metric or metrics it is appropriate to use when attempting to draw cross-national opportunity comparisons. We face difficulties both within the familiar categories and



across them. If education, for instance, takes different forms in different places, how can we judge whether a child in country *A* has better or worse educational opportunities than a child in country *B*? And even if we can make judgements of that kind, how can we decide whether it is appropriate or inappropriate to merge specific metrics into more general ones? Suppose, for instance, that we can find a measure of education such that people in Iceland plainly have better educational opportunities than people in Portugal, but that people in Portugal equally plainly have superior leisure opportunities than people in Iceland (sunny beaches, swimming pools, etc.). Is it legitimate to say that people in one of these places are better off (in a global sense) than people in the other, or can we say only that according to metric *E* Icelanders are better off while according to metric *L* the Portuguese are better off, and nothing beyond this?

Global egalitarians faced with this challenge will probably respond that the most urgent cases are cases of *gross* inequality where no reasonable person could doubt that the resources and opportunities available to members of *A* are superior to those available to members of *B*. We are not primarily concerned about Iceland/Portugal comparisons, but about comparisons between, say, any one of the current European Union member-states, and any sub-Saharan African country. And to make such comparisons we need only refer to measures such as the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI), defined in terms of capacities such as life expectancy and literacy that are regarded as basic across all cultures. Two things are worth noting about this response. First, by taking countries at the opposite ends of the development scale, and using the components of the HDI as our metric, it may indeed be possible to conclude that the set of opportunities open to a typical citizen of Niger, say, is strictly smaller than the set open to a typical citizen of France – there is no basic dimension along which the former has greater opportunities than the latter. But this does not mean that in general we are in a position to make such inter-societal comparative judgements, either within the group of rich societies or within the group of poor societies, and so although we might be able to identify the most egregious forms of inequality, we remain unable to specify what *equality* (of opportunity) would mean. Second, we can agree that the existence of societies scoring very low on the HDI is a global injustice without agreeing about *why* it is an injustice – whether by virtue of the *inequality* between rich and poor societies, or simply by virtue of the absolute level of deprivation experienced by most members of the

poorest societies. Our moral responses to the global status quo are over-determined, and so we can agree in practice about what needs to be done most urgently to promote global justice without having to formulate explicitly the principles that lie behind this judgement.

I want to end this section by stressing that the problem I have identified is not a technical problem of measurement: it is not that we lack the data that would enable us to compare societies in terms of the opportunities they provide for work, leisure, mobility, and so forth. It is essentially the problem of saying what equality of opportunity *means* in a culturally plural world in which different societies will construct goods in different ways and also rank them in different ways. The metric problem arises not just because it is hard to determine how much educational opportunity an average child has in society *A*, but because the meaning of education, and the way in which it relates to, or contrasts with, other goods will vary from place to place. We can only make judgements with any confidence in extreme cases; and in those cases, what seems at first sight to be a concern about inequality may well turn out on closer inspection to be a concern about absolute poverty or deprivation, a concern which suggests a quite different general understanding of global justice.

### III

In response to the argument I have advanced in Section II, would-be global egalitarians might suggest switching to a different conception of egalitarian justice – for instance to *global equality of resources*. I believe that such proposals will also fall victim to the problem of finding a suitable metric for measuring equality or inequality, and in the case of equality of resources I have tried elsewhere to demonstrate this.<sup>11</sup> But rather than run through the list of possible candidates for a global principle of egalitarian justice, I want to ask a more basic question, namely why should we be looking for such a principle in the first place? What makes us suppose that global justice demands that people should have equal shares of some *X*, whether the *X* be opportunities, or resources, or welfare, or something else?

It is sometimes suggested that global egalitarianism is entailed

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<sup>11</sup> Miller, “Justice and Global Inequality,” pp. 191–193.

by the general moral outlook that has come to be called “cosmopolitanism.” So we need to look carefully at what “cosmopolitanism” means when it is presented as a moral doctrine with no specific political implications – its defenders are at pains to insist that moral cosmopolitanism does not entail political cosmopolitanism, understood as a theory of world government.<sup>12</sup> The most straightforward account is given by Brian Barry, who holds that cosmopolitanism combines three elements: that individual human beings have (ultimate) value; that each human being has *equal* moral value; and that the first two clauses apply to all human beings.<sup>13</sup> The significance of this can best be appreciated by seeing what it rules out: first, attaching ultimate value to collective entities such as states or nations; second, weighting the value of people differently according to features such as race, sex, or nationality; third, attaching no moral value at all to some people – excluding them entirely from the moral universe. So cosmopolitanism will exclude, for example, racist doctrines that hold that the welfare of white people simply matters more than the welfare of blacks; or certain nationalist doctrines that hold that it is a matter of moral indifference what happens to people who do not belong to our national community.

But, what, more positively, does cosmopolitanism entail? Here its defenders are quick to point out that it can embrace many different substantive moral doctrines. For instance, it is consistent with a form of universal utilitarianism that tells us to enter the happiness of every human being with an equal weighting into the utilitarian calculus and to design policies and institutions accordingly. But it is also consistent

<sup>12</sup> For instance Charles Beitz writes:

“Cosmopolitanism need not make any assumptions at all about the best political structure for international affairs; whether there should be an overarching, global political organization, and if so, how authority should be divided between the global organization and its subordinate political elements, is properly understood as a problem for normative political science rather than for political philosophy itself. Indeed, cosmopolitanism is consistent with a conception of the world in which states constitute the principal forms of human social and political organization....” [Charles Beitz, “International Relations, Philosophy of,” in Edward Craig (ed.), *The Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998), Volume 4, p. 831].

<sup>13</sup> Brian Barry, “Statism and Nationalism: a Cosmopolitan Critique,” in Ian Shapiro and Lea Brilmayer (eds.), *Nomos: Global Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), pp. 35–36. A similar account of cosmopolitanism is offered in Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*, pp. 169–170.

with a doctrine of human rights that tells us simply that there are ways in which every human being must and must not be treated. It is consistent with global equality of opportunity, or global equality of resources, each of which manifests a different way of recognizing the equal value of human beings. But it does not require these, or any other form of global egalitarianism.

Why is this? Cosmopolitanism, as I have presented it here, and as its defenders present it, is a thesis about value, or about what is sometimes called “moral concern.” It says that the fate of human beings everywhere should in some sense count equally with us. Global principles of equality, on the other hand, are principles intended to govern the design of our institutions. They require that we should establish institutions that provide people everywhere with equal amounts of some good – resources, opportunity, etc. Such principles are action-guiding – they specify how we should behave as individuals, voters, and so forth. Claims about value and claims about how agents should act are distinct, and there can be no entailment from one to the other.

An example may help to drive this point home.<sup>14</sup> Suppose a child goes missing and there are fears for her safety. This is equally bad no matter whose child it is, and there are some agents, for instance the police, who should devote equal resources to finding the child in all cases. But there are other agents whose reasons for action will depend on their relationship to the child. If the child is mine, then I have a strong reason, indeed an overwhelming reason, to devote all my time and energy to finding her. If the child comes from my village, then I have a stronger reason to contribute to the search than I would have in the case of a child from another community. Of course if I have information that might help find that distant child, then I should give it to the police at once. It is not that I lack any responsibilities to the distant child. But nearly everyone thinks that I have a much greater responsibility to my own child, or to one I am connected to in some other way. The important point is that this is perfectly consistent with the view that it is equally bad, equally a matter of moral concern, when any child goes missing.

It might be said in reply here that if claims about the equal value of human beings have no implications for how we should act, they become redundant. All moral claims must in some way or other guide

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<sup>14</sup> I borrow this from David Miller, “Cosmopolitanism; A Critique,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 5 (2002), pp. 80–85.

our behaviour. But this is acknowledged in the example just given. The value of the distant child is registered in my obligation to supply relevant information to the police. In a similar way, the cosmopolitan premise means that we cannot be wholly indifferent to the fate of human beings with whom we have no special relationship of any kind. There is something that we owe them – but cosmopolitanism by itself does not tell us what that something is, and certainly does not tell us that we owe them some form of equal treatment. So cosmopolitans who go on to argue that their cosmopolitan convictions are best expressed through practical doctrines such as the doctrine of human rights, or global equality of opportunity, need to add a substantive premise about what we owe to other human beings as such – a premise that, to repeat, is not contained in the idea of cosmopolitanism as such. Some independent reason has to be given why cosmopolitan concern should be expressed by implementing the particular conception of global justice favoured by any particular author.<sup>15</sup>

So let me now consider a different attempt to justify global egalitarianism, one that begins from the premise that principles of justice are principles of equal treatment – they are principles that require us not to discriminate on morally irrelevant grounds such as (in most instances) a person's race or sex. Equality of opportunity, for instance, is taken to be a valid principle of justice within nation-states, but, so it is argued, a person's nationality is an irrelevant feature when we are considering what opportunities they should have, so the principle should be given a global application. As the argument is often put, nationality is a "morally arbitrary" feature of persons in the same way as their hair colour or the social class of their parents.

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<sup>15</sup> It also follows from this that "cosmopolitanism" may not be a very helpful concept in distinguishing between different approaches to global justice. If we remain with the general definition given in the text, then almost everyone who writes on the subject will fall under the cosmopolitan umbrella. Some authors provide stronger and therefore more discriminating definitions – for instance Beitz distinguishes "cosmopolitan liberalism" and "social liberalism" as competing approaches to the philosophy of international relations, saying of the former that it "accords no ethical privilege to state-level societies" and that it "effectively extends to the world the criteria of distributive justice that apply within a single society" [Charles Beitz, "Social and Cosmopolitan Liberalism," *International Affairs* 75 (1999), pp. 519–520]. I have commented on this tendency for conceptions of cosmopolitanism to slide between weaker and stronger versions in "Caney's 'International Distributive Justice': A Response," *Political Studies* 50 (2002), pp. 974–977, replying to Simon Caney, "International Distributive Justice," *Political Studies* 49 (2001), pp. 974–997.

So they are owed equal treatment as a matter of justice no matter which society they belong to.

Once again, we need to look carefully at how this argument moves from premise to conclusion, and when we do we find that it relies on a crucial equivocation about what it means for some feature of a person to be morally arbitrary. In one sense, a person's nationality might be described as morally arbitrary because in the great majority of cases the person in question will not be morally responsible for her national membership – people are simply born into a nation and acquire the advantages and disadvantages of membership as they grow up regardless of their choice. In this spirit, Caney writes that “people should not be penalized because of the vagaries of happenstance, and their fortunes should not be set by factors like nationality and citizenship.”<sup>16</sup> Here “nationality and citizenship” are assimilated to other features for which people cannot be held morally responsible – Caney mentions “class or social status or ethnicity” – and the implicit assumption is that if someone is not morally responsible for possessing a certain feature, then unequal treatment on the basis of that feature cannot be justified.

But “morally arbitrary” may also be used to signal the conclusion of the argument as opposed to its premise. Here a morally arbitrary feature of persons is a feature that should not be allowed to affect the way they are treated – it is a morally irrelevant characteristic, something we are bound to ignore when deciding how to act towards them. Obviously, if nationality is a morally arbitrary feature in this second sense, then inequalities of treatment based on national belonging are unjustified; this follows by definition. What needs to be shown is why we should regard nationality as morally arbitrary in this second sense.

In order to link the two senses of moral arbitrariness – the argument's premise and its conclusion – we need a substantive principle. Here is a likely candidate: if two people are differentiated only by features for which they are not morally responsible (arbitrariness in sense 1), then it is wrong that they should be treated differently (arbitrariness in sense 2). This principle would certainly do the job,

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<sup>16</sup> Caney, “Cosmopolitan Justice and Equalizing Opportunities,” p. 125. See also “Nationality is just one further deep contingency (like genetic endowment, race, gender, and social class), one more potential basis of institutional inequalities that are inescapable and present from birth” (Pogge, *Realizing Rawls*, p. 247).

but unfortunately it is quite implausible. We can see this by thinking about people who have different *needs*, where these needs are not the results of actions for which their bearers are morally responsible (think, for instance, of people who have been handicapped from birth). Need differences are morally arbitrary in sense 1, but they are not morally arbitrary in sense 2. Virtually everyone thinks that people with greater needs should be given additional resources, whatever precise characterisation of the moral duty involved they prefer to give.

So we have yet to be given a reason why it is wrong if people are better or worse off on account of their national membership. Why regard nationality as a morally irrelevant characteristic like hair colour rather than a morally relevant characteristic like differential need? The fact that in some sense it is “happenstance” that I belong to this nation rather than to any other does not settle the question, for the reason just given. It is equally “happenstance” that somebody should be born with a physical handicap. There has to be a *substantive* argument for the irrelevance of nationality, not merely a formal argument that trades on the ambiguity of “arbitrariness.”

What might the substantive argument be here? Well, the argument that nationality *should* be allowed to count in determining what opportunities are open to people depends on characterising national belonging in a certain way. It relies on the claim that people who form national communities have special relationships to one another that they do not have to people elsewhere, relationships that in practice give rise to global inequalities. So one may try to counter this by pointing out how relationships across the globe are becoming more like relationships within nations: people are increasingly caught up in economic interactions that are global in scope, environmental problems tend to spill across national borders, transnational political institutions are becoming ever more significant, and so forth. In other words, nationality should be treated as morally irrelevant because it no longer *describes* a significant form of relationship between people.

These observations are very much to the point insofar as we are thinking about global justice and what it should mean, especially if we take the view (as I do) that what justice requires us to do for other people depends crucially on the relationships in which we stand to

them.<sup>17</sup> Changes in the economic and political configuration of the world, and indeed in its physical characteristics insofar as these impact on human welfare, should indeed change our practical conception of global justice. But it does not follow that we should run straight into the arms of global egalitarianism. To do this would presuppose that we are already in a world in which nationality no longer constitutes *any* set of special relationships that are morally relevant. Such a presupposition seems implausible. Despite the globalising tendencies noted above, the great majority of people continue to identify strongly with their national community, most significant political decisions are taken at nation-state level, and nations to a greater or lesser extent constitute themselves as mutual benefit schemes in which people who suffer from certain types of loss – disability, ill-health, unemployment, and so forth—are compensated by those who enjoy better fortune. To show that all of this is morally irrelevant when assessing the opportunity sets enjoyed by people belonging to different national communities would require a great deal of argument. It is not enough to point out that new international relationships supervene upon these longer-standing national ones.

To conclude this section, I have tried to defeat three grounds on which global equality, in some form, might be defended as a requirement of justice. The first ground is that global equality is entailed by a general cosmopolitan claim about the equal value of human beings. I argued that there was no such entailment. The second ground was the claim that national boundaries, like other boundaries between people, were morally arbitrary and therefore irrelevant to justice. I pointed out that this depended on a crucial equivocation about moral arbitrariness. The third ground was that relationships among fellow-nationals were no longer special in a morally relevant sense. Unlike the first two grounds, this does provide a substantive argument of the right kind in favour of global equality, but I suggested it was implausible: despite much-feted aspects of globalisation, national membership still has features that appear to have considerable moral significance. So, in the absence of further arguments in its favour, there seems to be no positive reason why we should regard equality of opportunity, or some other principle of this form, as a requirement of global justice.

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<sup>17</sup> See my general argument to this effect in David Miller, “Two Ways to Think about Justice,” *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* 1 (2002), pp. 5–28.



## IV

Even if the positive arguments used to defend global egalitarianism are all defective, it might be said, cannot we still rely on the idea that equality is our default principle – the principle that we use to allocate resources and opportunities when we lack any good reason to discriminate, for instance when we have no information at all about the people among whom the allocation is going to be made?<sup>18</sup> Perhaps there is no strong reason why the child in rural Mozambique should have the same opportunities as the offspring of a Swiss banker. But, on the other hand, why should she not, assuming we are able to determine, or at least influence, the relevant opportunity sets? This throws the burden of proof back on those who are willing to permit global inequality, especially inequality between national communities. They are challenged in their turn to give positive reasons why global inequality may be morally defensible, so as to defeat the idea of equality as the fallback position, the principle we should use in the absence of reasons to discriminate.

In earlier essays I appealed to the value of national self-determination as a reason of this kind.<sup>19</sup> Democratically governed nations, I argued, are likely to make policy decisions that affect the resources and opportunities available to future generations of their own members, so that even if we were to imagine starting out from a baseline of equality, that equality will immediately be broken as political and cultural differences between nations find expression in the policies that they pursue.<sup>20</sup> To preserve equality we would have continually to transfer resources from nations that become relatively better-off to those that become worse-off, undermining political responsibility, and in a sense undermining self-determination too, insofar as this involves choosing between alternative futures and receiving the costs and benefits that result from such choices. But this argument has been challenged on the grounds that it makes individuals in the present suffer as a result of the decisions (including the mistakes) of their predecessors. Although it is widely accepted that individuals may fairly become worse off as a result of choices that

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<sup>18</sup> I have discussed the idea of equality as a default principle in Miller, *Principles of Social Justice*, pp. 233–236.

<sup>19</sup> Miller, “Justice and Global Inequality,” and Miller, “National Self-Determination and Global Justice.”

<sup>20</sup> This argument is also made in John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), Section 16.

they make themselves, how can this be extended to policy decisions taken collectively before their birth?<sup>21</sup>

This challenge raises questions about collective responsibility and its limits that I have tried to address elsewhere,<sup>22</sup> so here I want only to take up one particular issue, namely the parallel that is sometimes drawn between collective inheritance and individual inheritance. Equality of opportunity, like other egalitarian theories, is clearly hostile to the current practice of individual inheritance. If we wanted to pursue it consistently, we would tax all inherited wealth at 100% and provide each child with a capital grant (or its equivalent) of the same value when he or she reached maturity. Practical difficulties aside, such schemes are possible because we can identify a specific moment of inheritance at which the egalitarian principle is applied. That is, we can allow individuals freely to pursue the opportunities that their equal inheritance provides, and to become unequal in the process, so long as they do not attempt to pass on material benefits to their children, thereby undermining the scheme. But now consider what the collective analogue to this scheme would have to look like, if we wanted to preserve equality of opportunity at global level. Although we often talk about people as belonging to discrete generations, each of which passes certain benefits on to its successor, in one important sense this is a fiction: the real picture is one of continual population replacement. So if we imagine once again a world in which each nation starts out from a baseline of equality, we cannot allow nations to make autonomous decisions over the course of one generation – 30 years, say – and then apply an international tax-and-transfer regime that restores equality for the next generation. For in the meantime, all those reaching maturity in nations which pursue wealth-creating policies will be materially advantaged relative to those reaching maturity in nations with other goals. The only way to ensure continuing equality of opportunity over time would be to nullify political self-determination entirely in all those areas that

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<sup>21</sup> For this challenge, see for instance Cecile Fabre, “Global Egalitarianism: An Indefensible Theory of Justice?” in Daniel Bell and Avner De-Shalit (eds.), *Forms of Justice* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003), pp. 315–330; Beitz, “Social and Cosmopolitan Liberalism,” pp. 526–528; and Pogge, *Realizing Rawls*, pp. 252–253.

<sup>22</sup> In David Miller, “Holding Nations Responsible,” *Ethics* 114 (2003–2004), pp. 240–268; and in David Miller, “National Responsibility and International Justice,” in Deen Chatterjee (ed.), *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 123–143.

impact on individual opportunity sets, which in reality would mean virtually everywhere. In other words, an equal opportunity world would have to be a world in which all policy decisions that made a significant impact on the life-chances of individuals were taken by a central authority. The systematic pursuit of global equality of opportunity would not merely constrain national self-determination, but would undermine it altogether.

There is of course an alternative to the scenario I have just painted. This is to allow nations to continue to determine their own futures, including the sets of opportunities available to their members, but then to require them to allow free access to anyone who wants to join (to ensure “fair equality of opportunity” in Rawls’ sense, this would need to be accompanied by policies that nullified the cost of moving across national borders). But it is easy to see that this would also undermine self-determination, in any world that we can realistically envisage. For decisions about admission to citizenship are inseparable from other decisions about the kind of society one wants to build. Some nations setting out on a path of rapid economic growth may welcome all-comers, or at least everyone who possesses marketable skills. Other nations with demanding environmental objectives may pursue policies aimed at reducing population growth among their existing members to zero – policies which would obviously be undermined if significant number of immigrants were permitted to enter. Yet other nations may want to preserve linguistic or religious aspects of their public culture, implying selection on these grounds among potential candidates for membership. An unlimited right to free movement would pre-empt policy choices of this kind, and in a different way hollow out the idea of national self-determination.

One could, of course, respond to this by saying “So much the worse for national self-determination.” But recall that in this section of the article I am exploring the idea that global equality might be defended as a default option, not as a principle with a strong independent justification. If one had strong reasons for favouring global equality of opportunity, say, then one might well decide that national self-determination should go by the board in the name of global justice. But in the previous two sections I tried to show, first, that global equality of opportunity may be impossible to define, and second, that the arguments that have so far been given in its defence are defective. All we are left with, then, is the idea that in the absence of reasons to discriminate, we should treat people equally. Provided,

however, you attach *some* value to the idea that, in a culturally diverse world, political communities should be able to determine their own futures, we have a good reason to allow departures from global equality.<sup>23</sup> And this is sufficient to defeat global egalitarianism, when the latter is taken merely to be the default position.

## V

So far I have been looking critically at global equality as a principle of global justice. But as I mentioned at the outset, equality can also be valued for reasons that are not directly reasons of justice. More precisely, equality can be valued because inequality is seen as a *source* of injustice, without being unjust in itself; and it can be valued for reasons that are quite independent of justice. This idea in its general form has been explored in an important article by Tim Scanlon, and more recently insightfully applied to the global context by Charles Beitz.<sup>24</sup>

Let me, then, survey some reasons for objecting to global inequality that do not turn on the now-discredited idea of egalitarian justice. The first, and probably the most powerful, is that material inequalities broadly conceived will naturally translate into inequalities of power, which then become a source of ongoing global injustice.<sup>25</sup> This can happen in a number of fairly obvious ways. When

<sup>23</sup> As I shall point out in the next section, valuing self-determination also gives us a reason to *limit* global inequality. I assume here that an ethically acceptable nationalism must treat self-determination as a universal value. So, on the one hand, national communities must have the opportunity to set their own priorities in terms of economic policy, environmental policy, population policy and so forth, even though such collective choices will inevitably generate inequality along particular dimensions over time. On the other hand, these decisions may not deprive other national communities of opportunities for self-determination by, for example, creating global economic conditions in which their choices are almost completely constrained by the demands of economic survival. This need for a balance may justify transferring some powers – say over economic and environmental issues – upwards to international bodies. Valuing self-determination does not mean accepting national sovereignty in its traditional sense.

<sup>24</sup> T. M. Scanlon, “The Diversity of Objections to Inequality,” Lindley Lecture, University of Kansas, 1996, now reprinted in T. M. Scanlon, *The Difficulty of Tolerance: Essays in Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 202–218; Beitz, “Does Global Inequality Matter?”

<sup>25</sup> See also Debra Satz, “International Economic Justice,” in Hugh LaFollette (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Practical Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 636–637.

rich countries or rich corporations interact economically with communities or individuals who are very much poorer, they can set the terms of exchange and/or employment very much in their own favour, simply because they are far better placed to withdraw from the exchange than are those they exploit. This phenomenon has been widely documented, and all that I need to emphasize here is that the principle of justice that is violated by such interactions is not a strongly egalitarian one. To protest when workers in third world countries are employed in sweatshop conditions by powerful corporations, one does not have to believe that these workers ought to enjoy the same terms and conditions, or have the same opportunities, as their counterparts in the developed world. The injustice at stake is more rudimentary.

Next, gross inequality between nations makes it difficult if not impossible for those at the bottom end of the inequality to enjoy an adequate measure of self-determination, unless one imagines, counterfactually, that rich nations' interest in self-determination concerns only their own internal affairs, and not what happens in the world outside. In reality we know that inequalities in wealth and military power place severe constraints on the policies that weaker nations can pursue. So if our vision of a just world includes the idea that each nation should have a fair opportunity to pursue the particular goals that its members value most – the international equivalent of the domestic idea of toleration – then we are bound to be disturbed by inequalities on the current scale.

Finally, large inequalities in wealth and power also make it difficult to achieve what we might call “fair terms of co-operation” internationally. Given that there are a number of areas in which nation-states need to co-operate with one another to their mutual advantage—environmental policy is perhaps the most obvious—the distribution of costs and benefits in the agreement that emerges is likely to be determined largely by the relative bargaining power of the various parties. If rich countries refuse to co-operate altogether, poor countries have few sanctions that they can deploy to bring the recalcitrants back to the negotiating table. The refusal of the US to sign the Kyoto agreement is a clear instance of this phenomenon. Since we cannot place the parties behind a veil of ignorance, procedural fairness in practice requires that they should stand to gain or lose roughly the same amount when co-operation succeeds or fails, and large inequalities make this condition impossible to satisfy.

In a domestic context, there are two possible ways of tackling inequality as a source of injustice: reduce the inequality, or prevent it from having unjust consequences. We employ a battery of measures designed to prevent inequalities of wealth, in particular, from creating injustice, ranging from the regulation of employment contracts, through limitations on the inheritance of wealth, to restrictions on the political uses of money. It is not so easy to envisage global analogues of such measures. So in this respect we may have more reason to worry about global inequalities than about domestic ones. Of course, for the very same reasons that large global inequalities pose a threat to justice, they are also difficult to counteract. It is difficult to envisage rich states agreeing to narrow the gap in wealth and power between themselves and poor states. Perhaps the most hopeful prospect is of a world in which rich states, or blocks of rich states, compete with each other on roughly equal terms, and thereby also check one another's power *vis-à-vis* third parties. But rather than speculate further along these lines, I want to turn to two other reasons we might have for combating inequality, again drawing inspiration from domestic analogies.

One such reason is the value of what we may call *equality of status* or alternatively *social equality*. This is the idea of a set of social relationships within which people regard and treat each other as fundamentally equal, despite specific differences between them, and it is valuable because of the quality of the relationships in question: where it exists nobody has reason to feel subservient or deferential and on the other hand nobody has cause to be haughty or condescending.<sup>26</sup> Now, whatever one thinks about this idea, it might seem that it can only apply within a bounded society and not to the world as a whole. On the other hand, since travel and communication have broken down perceptual barriers between societies, we do appear increasingly to be living in a world in which people are likely to compare their own positions with those of people in wealthier societies, and may find the comparison humiliating or degrading. Thus it seems that there may be a global version of equality of status, and that this would give us reason to be concerned about large inequalities, especially of wealth and income, along dimensions that give rise to perceived status differences.

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<sup>26</sup> I have explored this more fully in David Miller, "Equality and Justice," *Ratio* 10 (1997), pp. 222–237 and in Miller, *Principles of Social Justice*, Chapter 11.

Although there is something to this argument, I am inclined to be sceptical. Equality of status is important among people who are in daily contact with one another, and who share a common way of life. Insofar as people belong to smaller communities and associations which form their main focus of identity, relationships between these sub-groups matter less than how people are treated within them, since it is there that they will gain the sense of self-esteem that comes from being treated as an equal (or not as the case may be). Rawls makes this argument in the section of *A Theory of Justice* where he is responding to the objection that a society governed by the difference principle may still give rise to what he calls “excusable envy”:

we tend to compare our circumstances with others in the same or in a similar group as ourselves, or in positions that we regard as relevant to our aspirations. The various associations in society tend to divide it into so many noncomparing groups, the discrepancies between these divisions not attracting the kind of attention which unsettles the lives of those less well placed.<sup>27</sup>

If this argument applies domestically, it seems it should apply with greater force still internationally, since for most people national boundaries mark out salient spheres of comparison and non-comparison. Admittedly international society lacks one feature which Rawls sees as counterbalancing material inequalities, namely equal citizenship: there is no common public sphere in which global citizens encounter one another as equals. On the other hand, cultural differences between societies make it less likely that people will be drawn into comparing themselves with each other along a single dimension such as material wealth. We might aspire to an international version of Michael Walzer’s “complex equality,” where people in different societies derived their self-esteem in part from their society’s success in living up to its own standards, whether materialistic or anti-materialistic. I suggest this not in order to defend the existing global order, since extremes of poverty prevent national projects of all kinds from being pursued, but as a way of thinking about what social equality might mean in a culturally plural world.

Finally, equality is sometimes defended because of its connection to the idea of *fraternity*: if we want people to live together in close, solidaristic relationships, then we should ensure that they live in much the same material conditions. Fraternity on a global scale might seem an impossibility: however a weaker version of the same claim is that if we want a world in which people are willing to

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<sup>27</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 536–537.

co-operate and to settle their differences peacefully, then this must also be a world in which material inequalities are not too great. In support of this, one might cite arguments made in recent years that the ultimate source of international terrorism is the material gulf that exists between the affluent West and the position of nations in the Middle East and elsewhere, giving rise to anger and resentment that manifests itself in hatred of all things Western.

Once again, my response to this argument is somewhat sceptical. What international co-operation requires is indeed not fraternity, but mutual respect between political communities who recognize their differences but also realise that they need to work together in a number of policy areas. And the precondition for this is not equality, but the absence of serious injustice. In other words, we have first to establish what justice requires in international contexts, and having done that we can then set down the conditions under which international co-operation is likely to prove feasible. To assume that the relevant principle of justice here is some form of substantive equality is to beg all the questions raised in earlier sections of this article. In my alternative account of global justice, the main bases for international co-operation would be respect for human rights world-wide, measures to prevent the international exploitation of political communities and smaller groups, and adequate opportunities for political self-determination for all peoples. One might want to add to this the redress of historic injustice: envy and resentment may be less a function of inequality *per se* than of a perception that societies that are currently poor owe their position to past domination and exploitation. Such perceptions are not always accurate, but where they are, they are likely to pose a serious obstacle to mutual respect and future co-operation between the parties involved.<sup>28</sup>

To conclude, once we have disentangled the issue of global inequality from questions about global justice, and in particular the deprivation suffered by people living in poor societies, we may still be concerned about the effects of large inequalities. But these concerns will be derivative, and will centre mainly on differences of *power* between rich and poor countries, and the likely effects of these on global justice in the future. If we could prevent the conversion of material advantage into political domination, there would be nothing

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<sup>28</sup> For an approach to historic redress that emphasises this forward-looking consideration, see Janna Thompson, *Taking Responsibility for the Past: Reparation and Historical Injustice* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002). I have discussed Thompson's position in "Inheriting Responsibilities" (unpublished).



inherently reprehensible about global inequality, and we might regard it as an inevitable feature of a culturally diverse world. Unfortunately, as I suggested earlier, blocking that conversion is likely to prove difficult if not impossible in practice. So we *should* continue to worry about the extent of global inequality, but not for the reasons touted by the global egalitarians whose views I have been discussing.

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