

National Partiality and Global Justice: A Response to Communitarian Particularism

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Abstract

In this paper I attempt to show the proper role of national partiality in relation to issues of global justice. A key subject in the debate about the legitimacy and scope of cosmopolitanism, raised particularly by its communitarian critics, hinges on what I identify as competing intuitions about principles of fairness. I mainly focus my response to Michael Walzer and Alasdair MacIntyre who represent paradigm cases of the communitarian critique, offering positive alternatives in partiality to one's own community. I employ the principles of fairness to counter the former's attribution of regulatory basis to the particularity of the nature of exchange, and repudiate the latter's rooting of justice in community. Next, I show that projects committed to reducing the uniquely political character of justice to any other realm, whether it be morality, the community, or sovereignty, are objectionable. Lastly, I discuss the relevance of national partiality to global distributive justice. I argue that nations are still the most powerful and effective vehicles capable of undertaking projects of global distributive justice. Tolerance and goodwill among nations is indispensable to projects of distributive justice. I ask: Can we steer away from unnecessary dichotomies of nation against world, and build international links of amity over secure foundations of national prosperity?

Keywords: Justice, Just, Distribution, Cosmopolitanism, Communitarianism, Ethics, Morality, Community, Political Theory, Philosophy, Partiality, Fairness, Fair, Principles, Nations, World, Global

National Partiality and Global Justice: A Response to Communitarian Particularism

In this paper I attempt to show the proper role of national partiality in relation to issues of global justice. A key subject in the debate about the legitimacy and scope of cosmopolitanism,¹ raised particularly by its communitarian² critics, hinges on what I identify as the competing intuitions about principles of fairness. Any robust approach addressing issues of global justice needs to integrate and harmonize these principles in its project. Positions that fail to accomplish this feat are vulnerable to refutation for their deficiency, shortsightedness, or both.

I believe that a viable cosmopolitan project for global issues of distributive justice would be built upon ongoing national commitments. Such a commitment would ensure that goodwill among nations and peoples can be built on a foundation of tolerance towards their particularity and diversity of political initiatives. National distributive systems, as exemplars of such initiatives, are the best and most powerful means of reaching global justice. As the most powerful and effective actors globally, nations are indispensable. Steering away from unnecessary dichotomies of nation against world, international links of amity can be founded and strengthened over the secure foundations of national prosperity.

I argue against reducing the unique character of distributive justice to any other realm, whether it be the community in the communitarian approach, morality as in the utilitarian approach, or sovereignty in the statist approach. Specifically, I oppose the views of Michael Walzer and Alasdair MacIntyre who represent paradigm cases of the communitarian critique, offering positive alternatives in partiality to one's own community. Briefly, Walzer defends

¹ Cosmopolitans argue for some sense of "community among all human beings, regardless of social and political affiliation" (Kleingeld & Brown, 2019). When it comes to global distributive justice, cosmopolitanism "focuses not merely on the moral duties of individuals or on the political relations among states, but on the justice of social institutions world-wide and the measures required to attain it" (Kleingeld & Brown, 2019).

² Communitarians argue that "the standards of justice must be found in forms of life and traditions of particular societies and hence can vary from context to context" (Bell, 2016). As such, communitarianism precludes universal and global conceptions of justice.

pluralism against any global sense of justice, while MacIntyre sees nothing overriding or going beyond the interests and needs of one's community. I employ the principles of fairness to counter the former's attribution of regulatory basis to the particularity of the nature of exchange, and repudiate the latter's rooting of justice in community. The constraints of this paper do not allow for the full presentation of either theorists' account, but the main points of contention will be drawn to attention. I begin by introducing the conflicted nature of competing intuitions applicable to different spheres of social distribution. Then, I will explore the conditions for the project of justice. This is followed by an analysis of the role of national partiality in addressing issues of global justice before concluding remarks.

Competing Intuitions and Social Distribution

In *The Flavours of Fairness*, Laura Niemi (2019) discusses her research in studying the moral cognition behind people's judgements of fairness by focusing on three commonly observed principles of fairness that guide moral judgements. The investigation focuses on how each position relates to individual differences in interpersonal orientation in the context of scarce resource allocation. The guiding principles are identified as "reciprocity—returning favors, charity—helping those in need, and impartiality—remaining blind to personal attributes" (Niemi & Young, 2017, pp. 438-439). These competing principles can lead to dilemmas across public and private situations. Reciprocity and charity involve personal considerations, "the unique past deeds and current needs of potential recipients," whereas impartial allocation relies on a consistent application of rules such as a "standardized" impersonal criteria (Niemi, 2019, p. 29). As Rawls and thinkers like him would have predicted, impartiality was commonly found to be the fairest principle (Niemi, 2019, p. 30). No less, some studies show "people disdain creating partiality so much, they throw excess resources they are tasked with distributing into the rubbish

to maintain equality” (Niemi, 2019). Impartiality was found to be optimally fair, just as morally praiseworthy as charity, while demanding far less theory of mind activity³ than both reciprocity and charity for moral evaluation (Niemi, 2019). Clearly, in the absence of information on personal attributes the only “prototypically fair” principle would be impartiality (Niemi & Young, 2017, p. 447). It is perceived to be more motivated by the interests of the group rather than individuals, and by reliable procedures rather than emotions (Niemi, 2019, p. 34).

Charity was found to be equally praiseworthy but less fair than impartiality (Niemi, 2019, p. 31). The psychological facility for “the empathetic concern” allows for the integration of the principle of charity into the understanding of fairness (Niemi, 2019). Charity could be approached either from an equality standpoint of impartiality or from the desire to build long-standing ties with exchange partners by reciprocity (Niemi & Young, 2017, p. 447).

Reciprocity was believed “to be the least fair, and the least morally praiseworthy allocation method” (Niemi, 2019, p. 31). Many dyadic relationships are founded on reciprocity. But, in outside relationships, like friendships, where competing interests bid for resources, reciprocity builds exclusive ties that benefit a select few (Niemi, 2019).

This presents a meta-ethical challenge. It invites “rival accounts of morality” to be taken as suitable according to certain “independently identifiable phenomenon [...] in the social world [...] to be described [...] by the contending parties” (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 11). If the aforementioned findings are generalizable to the wider moral landscape of humanity, then “rival and competing” sets of belief may commonly be found, perhaps universally, in the larger human population (Is Patriotism a Virtue?, 1984, p. 7).

³ ‘Theory of Mind’ refers to the cognitive capacity to attribute mental states to self and others (Goldman , 2012, p. 2).

Secondly, individuals with different interpersonal orientations and organizations promoting varying associative tendencies may take systematically different views on fairness, while each of these values may become more salient across diverse relationships and times of life (Niemi & Young, 2017, pp. 446,448). This is because the psychological and interpersonal tendencies of individuals are believed to be the culprit, not their constitution and sustenance “within a community” (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 10). This variation in different people’s intuitions is observed within, and not simply between, communities.

Fairness may mean different things in different contexts, even within a community, for different individuals and organizations. These systematically different views on fairness may be just why the moral import of the “global village” is still fully “unrecognized” (Singer, 1972, p. 232). Individual differences in interpersonal orientation call for alternative approaches to justification. Here, common patterns of moral intuition is presented. All three principles play a role in responses to questions of fairness. This is particularly relevant given how the context of the study is the allocation of scarce resources, which is the central issue of concern in debates about global justice as “socio-economic justice” (Nagel, 2005, p. 114). Curiously, these principles, as so identified, play the roles assigned to them in divergent spheres of social exchange to guide moral intuitions in different combinations, and perhaps to different degrees.

The divergent spheres of social life brings us to Michael Walzer (1983), who abstains from appealing to universal principles and instead highlights "the particularism of history, culture, and membership" (pp. 4-5). He criticizes the general impulse to seek “some underlying unity” or “a single criterion, or a single set of interconnected criteria” that rightly encompasses all distributive systems (Walzer, 1983). For Walzer, issues of distributive justice cannot be addressed from behind a “veil of ignorance,” or any abstract position, but from “the appropriate

setting” of membership in a “political community” in which common culture and understanding about justice may be presumed (Walzer, 1983, p. 28). He argues for a form of justice with a plurality of principles, each serving “its place, along with many others, uneasily coexisting, invoked by competing groups, confused with one another” (Walzer, 1983, p. 4). In the case of resource allocation, “different social goods ought to be distributed for different reasons, in accordance with different procedures, by different agents” (Walzer, 1983, p. 6). What is fascinating is how the abovementioned principles of fairness could account for this professed difference.

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