

Global Justice and Ideals

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Janna Thompson

The discussion of world-wide justice is messy, says Onora O'Neill.¹ What makes the subject matter such a mess is not merely its scope, the amount of disagreement about the issues, cultural differences, uncertainty about political possibilities or the outcome of present developments. There are more elementary and fundamental difficulties. How should we reason about global justice? Can we reason in the same way as we reason about justice in national societies, or is a different approach required? What ought to be the objective of our reasoning? Should we aim to determine the principles of justice for global society, or something else? Some of the problems highlighted by these questions, and the reasons why they arise, are evident in the critical responses to Rawls's 'law of peoples'.

Rawls propounds a view of justice for global society that he describes as 'realistically utopian'. It is utopian because it supposes that relations that all parties can recognise as just can be established and maintained, not only among peoples who are liberal and democratic, but also between democratic peoples and those he describes as 'decent hierarchical peoples' – that is, societies that are not liberal democracies and may not accept the idea that all individuals have equal status, but nevertheless are prepared to endorse basic human rights and allow their members to be represented through organisations of various kinds.² The utopian element of his approach is embodied in the 'original position' from which representatives of peoples make reach conclusions about

¹ Onora O'Neill, *Bounds of Justice* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.115.

² John Rawls, *Law of Peoples* (Cambridge University Press, 1999). Rawls does not tell us which existing non-democratic societies, if any, count as decent, or what form non-democratic representation might take.

principles of justice. The representatives of peoples are required to make decisions about principles from behind a veil of ignorance which conceals from each knowledge about which society he or she represents. The result is supposed to be principles that all will freely agree to regardless of their relative power, situation, or cultural tradition. The moral equality of peoples is written into the conditions of the agreement.

Rawls's theory is realistic in that 'it takes people as they are' (11). He takes it as a fact about people as they are that they are organised into societies that have had different histories, and, as a result, different political institutions and traditions; and that they have an interest in preserving their own institutions and governing themselves according to the conception of justice that they embody. Rawls does not think that people are likely to have the same ideas about justice or about political institutions. To suppose that even liberal democratic peoples could reach agreement about such matters is unrealistically utopian and for this reason Rawls rejects as totally out of question the possibility that they might form themselves into one state governed by common principles of justice. World government, he suggests, is not only unrealistic. It would probably be undesirable from a moral point of view. He does however think that representatives of peoples would agree to accept a law of peoples, each reasoning from their own political tradition and taking as basic their desire to maintain the political institutions which they regard as just.

The principles of justice that representatives of peoples arrive at are unsurprising. (If they were anything else, Rawls's attempt to be a *realistic* utopian would be a failure.) Each will agree to respect each other's equal right to freedom and independence, to fulfil commitments, to respect basic human rights (freedom from slavery and serfdom, liberty of conscience, and freedom of ethnic groups from mass murder or genocide), and to refrain from aggression. He thinks that decent hierarchical societies will agree to the same principles, and he thinks all will agree to provide assistance to 'burdened' peoples suffering from poverty and underdevelopment, but only to the point where members of

these societies are supplied with basic means of life. The law of peoples does not require that resources be shared among the people of the world on a continuing basis. It does not contain a difference principle.

The Problem

Rawls is criticised by some of his critics for being too conservative – that is, too much of a realist - and by others for being too utopian. I will concentrate here on the attack made on his law of peoples by Allen Buchanan, who, in effect, criticises him for being both. Buchanan thinks that Rawls is too much of a realist in that he presupposes the existence of a Westphalian world order of more or less self-sufficient states able to distribute their resources according to their views about justice.³ On the other hand, Rawls is also too utopian because he assumes that peoples are unified societies in which members all adhere to common principles of justice and support their political institutions.

The realist assumptions Rawls makes, according to Buchanan, are simply false. The Westphalian world order has vanished. States are no longer self-sufficient; nor are most of them able to make autonomous decisions about how resources should be distributed among their members. Global society, Buchanan claims, has a basic structure – an economic and political order which affects people's life chances and gives some far more favourable circumstances than others. It cries out for a arrangement that would make it distributionally more just, and Buchanan thinks that representatives of peoples in the original position would, at the very least, want to ensure global equality of opportunity

³ Allen Buchanan, 'Rawls's Law of Peoples: Rules for a Vanished Westphalian World', *Ethics* 110 (2000), 697-721. Though Rawls speaks of a law of *peoples*, Buchanan believes that he is really talking about states. Rawls prefers the terms 'peoples' because he wants to deny to these political societies the right to war which has been traditionally accorded to states. I suggest below that there might be another reason for preferring the term 'peoples'.

and would also insist on more democratic trans-national political structures – perhaps involving a re-structuring of the United Nations.

The accusation that global justice demands more than Rawls is prepared to acknowledge is very common among his critics. Thomas Pogge also thinks that Rawls is wrong about what representatives of people would agree to. If they care about the well being of their people and make the reasonable assumption that their people would, other things equal, prefer to have a higher rather than a lower average standard of living, then they will insist on a more equitable distribution of resources.⁴ Pogge even has a practical suggestion about how this could be achieved. Peoples could be taxed according to amount of resources they use, and the proceeds could be distributed through the UN to poor countries. Charles Jones agrees with Buchanan that the focus of an inquiry into global justice ought to be the ‘international basic structure, the major institutions in the world as a whole which affect persons and their access to desired goods and resources’, and he too thinks that global justice requires a more equitable distribution of resources.⁵

Buchanan also thinks that Rawls wrongly assumes that ‘peoples’ are well organised, coherent societies in which people respect and support their political institutions. He reminds us that national unity, so far as it exists, is often the result of a history of suppression. Making peoples the subjects of a theory of justice sweeps this history under the carpet and ignores the persistence of communities inside national societies which have a political identity of their own and may be in conflict with the dominant institutions of their state. These communities may be nations of indigenous people or ethnic, linguistic or religious groups fighting for their liberation from what they regard as captivity within an alien state. Rawls assumes that the question of who is a people has been settled when it has not.

⁴ Thomas W. Pogge, ‘An Egalitarian Law of Peoples’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 23 (1994), 195-224.

⁵ Charles Jones, *Global Justice: Defending Cosmopolitanism* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 8.

Buchanan's two criticisms are cogent but they operate at cross purposes. If we don't know what counts as a people, then surely we can't even start to consider what the principles of justice for global society ought to be. We don't know whom we are supposed to be addressing. This is as much of a problem for Buchanan's attempt to ground more radical requirements of distribution as it is for Rawls's law of peoples. A way of solving this problem is suggested by other critics of Rawls. Andrew Kuper, for example, insists that individuals of world society ought to be the ones who make a decision from the original position about principles of justice and political arrangements in global society – not representatives of peoples.⁶ Individuals, as the ultimate bearers of moral value, should be able to determine what political associations they want to form, along with the principles of justice that govern them. The problem is that this suggestion undermines the point of the exercise that Rawls and his critics are engaged in. The social contract has a role in a thought experiment the purpose of which is to determine the principles or political arrangements that rational agents would agree to given certain basic assumptions about fairness. It is supposed to help us come to a conclusion about what principles of justice we should endorse. We could imagine that all of the people of the world with their different political identities and experiences, and their conflicting ideas about justice and community hold a kind of global parliament, engage in discourse and finally manage to make a decision about justice and global order. But we can only speculate about what this decision might be, and thus the fantasy is of little use in our effort to determine principles of justice for global society.

It might be insisted that a law of peoples doesn't have to specify who the peoples are. So long as world government remains an impossible or morally undesirable prospect, our reasoning about justice can take for granted that the world will consist of peoples,

⁶ Andrew Kuper, 'Rawlsian Global Justice: Beyond *The Law of Peoples* to a Cosmopolitan Law of Persons', *Political Theory* 28 (2000), 640-674.

whatever form these political societies take. The law of peoples is a law for these peoples, whatever they turn out to be. By using the word ‘peoples’ rather than ‘states’ Rawls is possibly endorsing this position. So understood he is presenting an abstract theory that rises above nationalist struggles and identity politics – a view of justice that is not affected by the fact that what groups count as peoples has not been settled and perhaps never will be. The problem with this idea is, first of all, that it has nothing to say about how the issue should be settled – what principles of justice ought to guide us in settling disputes about who counts as a people. Moreover Rawls does make some assumptions about the nature of peoples which may turn out in the future to be false (or which may be false now). He assumes that peoples ought to be regarded as equals. But it is unlikely that we can hold onto this assumption once we admit the possibility or actuality of peoples of different kinds. The European Union might count as a people – sometime in the future, if not now – but it doesn’t seem to make sense to ask whether it should be treated as an equal alongside Spain, France, or Italy. We might want to regard the Navaho nation as a people, but it is not clear whether, or in what contexts, it counts as equal in moral status to the United States. (It isn’t even obvious that a tiny state like Luxembourg ought to count as the equal of a large and densely populated state like China.) But if we can’t assume equality among peoples then Rawls’s method of making a decision about principles of justice is questionable – not to mention the conclusions he reaches.

Let us simply assume, as both Rawls and Buchanan do, that we have a good enough grasp on what counts as a people so that we can set their representatives the task of determining principles of justice for global society. Would they opt for Rawls’s principles or the more demanding ones of Buchanan or Pogge? There is, I suggest, no obvious answer. Let us assume that they do not hold the Westphalian world view that Buchanan accuses Rawls of adhering to. They know that global society has a basic

structure that favours some peoples over others. They have been made familiar with proposals for re-distribution of resources such as Pogge's. How will the representatives reason? Here are two possibilities (not necessarily the only ones).

Representative A: I know that the members of my society (whatever this is) will prefer to have more resources than they now have. But I am also bound as representative of a people to ensure that we remain as autonomous as possible, able to make our own decisions in our own way and to protect our political institutions, and by doing so, the ways of life that we value. If we are poor, then it would be a good thing to obtain resources from those who are wealthy, but it is not likely that the wealthy will provide them to us unconditionally. They will insist (reasonably from their point of view) that they be used as efficiently as possible and they may insist that they be distributed among us according to their ideas of justice. They are likely to demand that our institutions be reformed according to their standards of efficiency and justice, and that we change our traditions and ways of life accordingly whether we want to or not. We will have even less autonomy than we have now, less ability to protect the institutions we value. I do not have any confidence that making global institutions more democratic will protect us. Such a democracy could act as a tyrant to small, weak peoples. Therefore, I do not think it is wise to accept a global principle of resource distribution, and reluctantly I have decided to reject it.

Representative B: I want to protect the institutions and autonomy of my people, but on the other hand, I have to take seriously the possibility that the people I represent are very poor. I realise that accepting a global re-distribution principle is likely to have a profound effect on global politics and may be detrimental to our autonomy as a peoples. But autonomy does not mean all that much to people who are very poor. So with some trepidation I accept the proposed principle.

The result of the exercise, I suggest, is not going to be a clearcut endorsement of a principle of justice, but uncertainty. What the above reasoning is meant to illustrate is not merely that representatives might come to different conclusions in the original position, but that the conclusions they do come to would be hesitant and reached with some difficulty. So even if every representative happened to argue in the same way as Representative B, the result would hardly be decisive. Such a decision would not be a recipe for stability – something that Rawls regards as essential to any viable law of peoples.

Should the failure of our imagined representatives to endorse wholeheartedly a more radical principle of justice reconcile us to a conservative outcome like that of Rawls? The answer seems to me to be ‘no’. For Buchanan, Pogge, and Jones are right. Global society does have a basic structure that operates to the disadvantage of many of the world’s people. Most of the world’s people are in a powerless position in relation to international institutions which have often acted in ways contrary to the interests of the poor. This situation is unfair and not one that anyone who believes in justice and democracy ought to accept. The difficulty is determining what to do about it – theoretically as well as in practice.

Analysis of the Problem

I suggest that the problem illustrated in the last section has two sources. The first has to do with the assumptions that have to be made in order to arrive at a theory of justice, and the second is the very idea that we ought to be looking for *principles* of global justice.

All attempts to reason about principles of justice make political presuppositions. They presuppose a constituency: a reasonably well defined and bounded collection of people or peoples to whom the principles are supposed to apply and who can be expected

to accept them – so long as they are rational and to have a sense of justice. And they assume an institutional framework in which the theory can take effect without having detrimental or unanticipated effects on other things people are justified in valuing. This is so even in the case of classical social contract theory which pretends to be starting from scratch in the state of nature. Locke, for example, assumes the existence of a people who are willing to form a political society with each other. He assumes that there is or can be a central authority that reliably enforces a law and that there are or could be mechanisms enabling citizens to control their rulers well enough to protect their basic rights without having a crippling effect on the ability of a government to perform other functions. He makes assumptions about how political societies can work. Rawls has always been forthright about his assumptions. In *A Theory of Justice* he assumes he is legislating for a unified, reasonably well off liberal democracy. In *Law of Peoples* he assumes a world of independent peoples. His principles of justice do not apply to circumstances in which the assumptions do not hold. Poor societies cannot be expected to accept the same principles as reasonably wealthy societies. Their priorities are likely to be different. Many people in non-liberal societies will not accept the assumptions that Rawls makes in *A Theory of Justice*. And societies that are divided – those that contain minority groups fighting for liberation or independence are not likely to accept a difference principle if this requires that they share their resources with those they regard as aliens, rivals, or enemies.

Global society is in flux. New nations are being made out of old, confederations are being formed, but it is not clear what powers they will acquire or how they will relate to the individuals and peoples that make them up. It is not clear whether these confederations, let alone world society as a whole, will become democratic, or what form democracy could take outside of a national setting. People are divided about the desirability of transnational institutions and have different ideas about how global society should develop. Some want to return to a world society in which states are relatively

autonomous. Some regard this as impossible or undesirable and welcome globalisation. Some think that powerful regulatory institutions are needed in order to ensure that global society becomes more just. Others think that such institutions would themselves be a source of injustice. In other words, the institutional framework on which reasoning about principles of justice depends doesn't exist or is itself in contention. Given that this is so, nothing much can be accomplished by those who try to make a more radical use of Rawls's original position. Reasoning like this cannot produce a determinant result (without making simplifying and false assumptions, as did Rawls).

Nor do I think will other methods of arriving at principles of justice. For example, a rule utilitarian has to work out which principles would provide the best consequences overall for members of a society. In a domestic society it is at least possible to imagine that such reasoning can lead to reliable, or at least plausible, results. We know how our institutions operate; we know what kind of effects they are likely to have. But world society with all of its uncertainties is not a conducive environment for such reasoning.

The second problem is a matter of principles. Rawls and his critics all suppose that the objective of reasoning about justice is a set of principles that can be called a theory of justice. Principles are general, but they are supposed, nevertheless, to be definite enough to tell members of a political society what they ought to do or refrain from doing, or to provide a measure that can be used in an unambiguous way to make judgments about the nature and performance of political institutions. There are two reasons for insisting on such principles. First of all, Rawls, and most of those influenced by him, think of principles as being the foundation for a political constitution or the basis for criticising political institutions or practices. As Rawls sees it in *A Theory of Justice*, principles of justice are the input to constitutional measures, and these in turn provide the framework for law. This means that principles of justice have to be determinant and unambiguous

enough so that they can be used to decide which of a range of possible constitutions count as just.⁷

The second reason why principles have to be fairly determinant is that a theory of justice as a set of principles is supposed to define what justice means, at least in a certain context. Political philosophers take the production of such a theory as their principal task, and when they have achieved it to their satisfaction they assume that the real work of political theory has been accomplished. This does not mean that no problems remain. There are always going to be difficulties about how a theory should be applied in non-standard cases, and if principles can come into conflict, then resolving the conflict where it arises will be a matter of concern.⁸ However, to a philosopher who has a theory of justice, these seem like relatively minor matters; they can be dismissed as mere engineering problems.

These are reasons why philosophers so often assume that reasoning about justice is a matter of stating and justifying principles. But there are no unproblematic principles of justice for global society. We have reason to reject Rawls's law of peoples as too conservative. But there is no alternative set of principles to put in their place. Nothing so determinant is possible. Rather than abandoning the subject all together, it would be worthwhile to find out whether there is another way of thinking about justice in international society.

⁷ Rawls says the following in *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford University Press, 1972): 'Justice as fairness begins, as I have said, with one of the most general of all choices which persons might make together, namely with the choice of first principles of a conception of justice which is to regulate all subsequent criticism and reform of institutions. Then, having chosen a conception of justice, we can suppose that they are to choose a constitution and a legislature to enact laws, and so on, all in accordance with the principles of justice initially agreed upon' (13).

⁸ In *A Theory of Justice* Rawls avoids the possibility of conflict by establishing an order of priority among principles.

Is This a Job for Ideals?

Responding to the objection that framing principles of global distributive justice is futile since there are no institutions capable of implementing such principles, Buchanan makes the point that principles of justice can have ‘a useful role to play prior to the point at which they can be successfully implemented’ (713). They can determine what sorts of institutions we need to build in order to achieve justice. In any case, a principle of justice has an application even if people can only partially live up to it (as Rawls’s distinction between ideal and non-ideal theories allows). So long as we are thinking of principles of justice in a Rawlsian way, this reply is inadequate. A theory of justice can guide us in the construction of institutions only in those cases where we are fairly sure that the political presuppositions of the theory are fulfilled. But uncertainties about how and whether a principle of global distribution could be implemented without unacceptable harm to other things that people value are reason to think that the presuppositions of a theory of distributive justice are not satisfied in global society. Rawls’s distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory is no help in this case because its point is to focus our attention on how political institutions not unlike our own would operate if people were prepared to be rational about principles of justice and to obey fully the requirements of justice. The distinction does not enable us to leap the gap between the world as it is and what it might be like if global distributive justice were realised.

On the other hand, Buchanan is surely right to stress that the non-existence of a political basis for global distributive justice should not prevent us from insisting that global society ought to be more equitable. The moral demand that resources be distributed in a more equitable way in global society is best understood, I suggest, as an ideal rather than as a principle of distributive justice. Buchanan should be understood as advancing an ideal rather than stating a principle. This I think is true of many of the

philosophers who want a better deal for the disadvantaged of global society.⁹ For example, Pogge in ‘Cosmopolitanism and Sovereignty’ argues that we have duty to create an institutional scheme that can overcome avoidable human deprivations.¹⁰

Ideals can be of many different kinds, but the ideals I shall be concerned with are general moral objectives. Their being moral has two important implications. First of all, those who hold them must believe that they ought to concern themselves with finding a way in which they can be put into practice. They don’t have to believe that they can ever be fully implemented, but they do have to think that something can and should be done to implement them. An ideal is not merely a wish: (‘I wish that everyone in the world had enough to eat.’) The second implication is that moral ideals stand in need of a justification. Some ideals will be so obviously ideal to many people that a defence of them will seem unnecessary. Others may be more open to question. But in any case, those who hold them must think that they adhere to them for good reasons. We can defend our moral ideals, hold rational discourses with others about what ideals should be accepted and why. This does not mean that every rational, morally sensitive person will have the same moral ideals.

I once proposed the following list of ideals for global society.¹¹

Peace and security. Individuals and their communities should not be threatened by war, oppression, or other serious harms, and there should be peaceful, mutually acceptable means of settling disputes.

⁹ Ideals are sometimes presented as substantives – eg. peace, freedom, etc. – and principles in propositions. However, this semantic difference is not critical. Ideals can be presented in propositions. And of course principles can be more or less abstract and open-ended. So I do not think that principles and ideals are different in kind. Rather there is a gradation between the two.

¹⁰ *Ethics* 103 (1992), 57. Pogge admits that he cannot a Rawlsian-style set of precisely defined rights with relative weights or priority rules (56).

¹¹ In ‘Community Identity and World Citizenship’ in D. Archibugi, D. Held, M. Kohler (eds.), *Re-imagining Political Community: Studies in Cosmopolitan Democracy* (Polity, 1998), 191.

Self-determination of communities. Individuals should be able to preserve and maintain communities that are important to their identity and well being.

Individual freedom. Individuals should be free to make their own life choices and to associate with whomever they please.

Individuals well-being. Everyone should have access to resources, material and social, which enable them to make meaningful choices and enable their communities to flourish.

Reasoning with a list of ideals like these requires first of all a clarification, to the extent that this is possible, of what they entail and how they are related to each other: in what ways they might complement each other or come into conflict. Having become more clear about what our ideals are, we are then in a better position to explain why we have included them in our list, to work out which seem more important, and to consider whether there are other ideals which ought to be included. The most difficult step is to apply them: to consider how presently existing institutions might be reformed so that the ideals can be realised, however imperfectly, or to work out what global society would have to be like in order to realise the ideals more fully (and whether these changes can be brought about without compromising the ideals). Thinking about how ideals might be realised is also a test of them, for it forces us to consider whether 'ideal' institutions would really be all that desirable, or whether a particular ideal should be pursued given present conditions.

This sketchy account indicates an important difference between reasoning about ideals and reasoning about principles. When reasoning about principles philosophers can generally take for granted the political presuppositions of their theory and can concentrate on what they like to do best: conceptual reasoning that doesn't require much of an input from empirical theories. Reasoning about ideals does involve abstract reasoning about concepts, but a crucial part of it is practical reasoning about how ideals can be realised,

and this requires knowledge about institutions, well supported views about what is politically possible, and theories about how political and economic systems work. For an ideals-based approach, reasoning about justice is a form of applied philosophy. If my argument is correct, there is really no alternative for those who want to reason about justice in global society. But I want in addition to stress some of the characteristics and advantages of ideals-based reasoning.

An ideals based approach allows for the fact that people are likely to have different ideals, or at least different interpretations of any list of ideals, and different ideas of how they should be implemented. This means of course that the subject of global justice is indeed messy, but an ideals approach is at least honest about the mess. It doesn't pretend that anything can be settled by appeals to a Rawlsian original position or by a utilitarian calculus. It doesn't pretend that decisions can be made without negotiation and compromise. I think it can be argued that implicit in the ideals approach is a political ideal concerning democratic decision making: that everyone should be being able to participate in a discourse to decide what ideals should be accepted and how they should be implemented. If this is so, then those who take the ideals approach are also committed to promoting widespread discussion and finding institutional means for holding such discussions. In a way, I am endorsing Kuper's view that decisions about global justice should be made together by all of the world's people. But I am not supposing that any philosopher, no matter how prescient, could say what the results would be. The exercise is not a Rawlsian one.

Ideals are flexible. They may be used to reason about global society as a whole. But we can also appeal to them in order to judge whether relations between particular states, between transnational corporations and governments, or between peoples of a region are just, and to guide us in our thinking about how they can become more just. We don't

have to determine what counts as a people before we make use of them, though we may use them to make judgements about how global society should be organised.

An ideals based approach has to acknowledge that there is likely to be more than one ideal for global society, and that these ideals can come in conflict with each other and with moral obligations or duties. I have suggested that attempts to realise the ideal of universal individual well-being may come in conflict with the value many people place on community autonomy. Some people (for example, socialist revolutionaries) think that the ideal of peace will have to be compromised for the sake of achieving greater individual well-being. What kinds of compromises should be made is going to be an issue for debate, but being prepared to make compromises among your ideals is not a moral weakness. If ideals are plural than any realistic attempt to consider how they might be realised together will have to be prepared to make accommodations and adjustments. If ideals are plural, then the single-minded pursuit of a particular ideal is likely to be morally undesirable as well is imprudent.

In my view, facing up to the fact that ideals are likely to conflict, and that trying to implement one may get in the way of implementing another, can only lead to an improvement in discussions of global justice. Philosopher's have tended to concentrate on one or two ideals – for example, resource equity, or democracy, and have not given much thought to how implementing these ideals might conflict with other things of moral value that people want to protect.

Recognising that ideals are likely to be multiple and that it would be a mistake to pursue one single-mindedly at the expense of others might also help to answer a criticism that has often been made about 'idealism'. Those who adopt a realist approach to international relations define their position in opposition to 'idealists', whom they accuse of bringing down disasters on their nation or the world as a whole through their pursuit of their ideals. For example, they think that those who pursued the ideal of peace in the

1920s and 30s encouraged fascist aggression and thus put the world in peril. Let us assume that this realist criticism is right, at least in some cases. What is wrong with the behaviour of idealists whom realists rightly criticise is not the fact that they pursued their ideals, but, perhaps, that they treated their ideals as if they were principles – as if they could be put into practice without difficulties or complications - or because they pursued one ideal single-mindedly without considering how doing so might conflict with other ideals that they had reason to accept (like freedom of individuals).

Idealism without realism is dangerous. However, idealism can take a more defensible form. ‘Realistic idealists’ regard political naivety as a moral fault. Realistic idealists are realistic about what can be accomplished at a particular time and place and about the need to make compromises. They take it as their duty to understand the social and political consequences of the pursuit of their ideals. They do not pursue any ideal without a careful consideration of how their activities are likely to affect their ability to realise other ideals that they have reason to acknowledge or to fulfil their moral obligations. On the other hand, realism without idealism is ethically impoverished. In their effort to avoid idealism of any kind, many realists have fallen into extremely dubious moral positions. Some have adopted a kind of ethical egoism – making the interest of their own state the object of all their endeavours. Others simply assume that the interests of the people of the world will best be served by leaders who pursue the interests of their state or act to maintain a balance of power. But this assumption is as questionable as the Westphalian view of the world that Buchanan criticises.

Idealists can be realistic in the pursuit of their ideals. However, it is an important advantage of an approach to justice based on ideals that ideals transcend particular social conditions or political arrangements. An idealist can believe, for example, that the resources of the world ought to be more equitably distributed without knowing how (or whether) global institutions and practices can be constructed that would bring this about.

He or she can believe that people ought to be able to protect their valued communities without being committed to the preservation of any particular kind of community – to nation states, for example. It allows not only that political circumstances can change, but that people themselves can change their relationships, allegiances or their ideas about what is important as the result of social change or through discourse about ideals and how to realise them.

An ideals based approach is thus in a better position to engage in a radical critique of existing political reality. Theories of justice that consist of principles tend to be conservative. Principles, as I have pointed out, have to be tied to particular political arrangements and assumptions, and it is not surprising that those who search for principles of justice are likely to take for granted existing political arrangements. Rawls's utopianism amounts to presenting an idealised conception of a world of states. He has not much to say to those who think that we should move beyond a system of states or at least modify it in radical ways. Those who take an ideals based approach have no problem countenancing radical ideas about global change. Indeed those who make radical proposals generally do so because their ideals make them critical of existing structures and relationships.

Global society has generated problems that existing institutions have not been able to solve. New structures have to be created and no one knows exactly what form they can or should take. An approach to justice that is capable of transcending existing institutions is clearly required if we are to have anything worthwhile to say about justice in global society. But the same thing could be said about justice in national societies. Buchanan points out that national states are not the unified societies that political theorists have sometimes assumed. Many of them contain communities that are dissatisfied with the status quo and want to create different political structures. If we think that there is, at least sometimes, a justification for their demands, then political assumptions on which

national states in the present form depend may have to be questioned. An approach that begins with ideals, considers how they ought to be understood and might be put into practice is as relevant to this problem as it is to problems of global justice.

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