

Special Relationships, Motivation and the Pursuit of Global Egalitarianism

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Article abstract

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SPECIAL RELATIONSHIPS, MOTIVATION AND THE PURSUIT OF GLOBAL EGALITARIANISM

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ABSTRACT

One of the most significant challenges facing global egalitarian theorists is the motivational gap: there is a noted gap between the duties imposed by a global commitment to the equal moral worth of all people and the willingness of the wealthy to carry out these duties. For Pablo Gilabert, the apparent absence of motivation to act justly on a global scale presses us to consider the importance of feasibility in developing a persuasive account of global justice, part of which requires being attentive to what motivates us to act in support of global egalitarianism. In this article, I am critical of Gilabert's account of the role that relationships between individuals play in conceiving our global justice duties. I begin with an account of some confusion in Gilabert's account of the actual costs likely to be imposed on citizens of wealthy states as a result of the duties he demands of us and why it is important to resolve that confusion. I will then consider, and critique, Gilabert's account of special responsibilities. I shall argue that, fundamentally, there is an ineliminable tension between the special responsibilities individuals legitimately possess and the duties they have to eradicate global poverty.

RÉSUMÉ

L'un des défis les plus importants auxquels sont confrontés les théoriciens égalitaristes à l'échelle mondiale est celui de l'écart de motivation : on observe un écart entre, d'une part, les devoirs imposés par un engagement mondial envers la valeur morale égale de toutes les personnes, et d'autre part, la volonté des riches de s'acquitter de ces devoirs. Pour Pablo Gilabert, l'absence apparente de motivation à agir justement à l'échelle mondiale nous presse, dans l'élaboration d'un état des lieux convaincant de la justice dans le monde, de réfléchir à l'importance de la faisabilité, ce qui exige notamment d'être attentif à ce qui nous motive à agir en faveur d'un égalitarisme mondial. Dans cet article, je critique le compte rendu que Gilabert fait du rôle des relations entre les individus dans la conception de nos devoirs en matière de justice mondiale. Pour commencer, je souligne chez Gilabert une certaine confusion quant aux coûts réels susceptibles d'être imposés aux citoyens des pays riches découlant des devoirs qui, d'après l'auteur, leur incombent, et les raisons pour lesquelles il est important de clarifier cette confusion. J'examinerai ensuite et critiquerai le compte rendu que Gilabert fait des responsabilités particulières. Je soutiens qu'il existe fondamentalement une tension inéliminable entre les responsabilités particulières qui reviennent légitimement aux individus et le devoir qu'ils ont d'éradiquer la pauvreté dans le monde.

One of the most significant challenges facing global egalitarian theorists is the motivational gap: there is a noted gap between the apparent duties imposed by a commitment, globally, to the equal moral worth of all people and the willingness of the wealthy to carry out these duties. For some, the gap tells against pursuing global egalitarianism; the absence of the right kind of motivation means that these duties cannot be met, and therefore that these alleged duties are, after all, merely alleged. For others, including Pablo Gilabert in his impressive *From Global Poverty to Global Equality*, the apparent absence of motivation to carry out the duties mandated by a commitment to global egalitarianism has no impact on its “moral desirability”, i.e., whether it is morally obligatory.¹ The claim that the motivational gap exists can therefore only press us to reconsider the feasibility of meeting the demands imposed by a commitment to global egalitarianism. Here Gilabert is optimistic: we can see evidence of an incipient universal global solidarity, which is already serving to underpin a commitment to global egalitarianism. In this brief article, I shall make some critical observations about Gilabert’s account of the mechanisms by which relationships between individuals play a role in understanding and conceiving the duties imposed on us by a commitment to global egalitarianism. I will begin with a brief account of what I believe is some confusion in Gilabert’s account of the actual costs likely to be imposed on citizens of wealthy states as a result of the duties he demands of us and why, if we are concerned about the motivation to pursue poverty eradication, it is important to resolve that confusion. I will then consider, and critique, Gilabert’s account of special responsibilities. I shall argue that, fundamentally, there is an ineliminable tension between the special responsibilities individuals legitimately possess and the duties they have to eradicate global poverty.² These are critiques intended to continue the important conversation that Gilabert has begun in his careful, detailed, and most importantly, exciting book.

1. MORAL MOTIVATION AND COSTS OF POVERTY ERADICATION

Let me begin, just briefly, by assuming that Gilabert is right to divorce the moral desirability of poverty eradication from the motivational challenges that it faces (I will put pressure on this attempt in the next section). Gilabert offers us three “kinds” of motivation we might seek as support for eradicating poverty. Prudential or self-interested reasons may motivate individuals or states to work towards eradicating global poverty; for example, states might be motivated to contribute to eradicating poverty if they believed that there was a strong link between poverty and terrorism. Sympathy for others – the belief that others’ well-being is constitutive of our own in some important sense – may also motivate support for poverty relief. For example, women in wealthy states might find themselves sympathetic to the women who fall victim to rape in war zones, and thus for sympathetic reasons work to alleviate the conditions under which women are vulnerable to this sort of violence. These two reasons, however, are fundamentally inadequate, says Gilabert. The most powerful of motivations, he tells us, is a commitment to justice; where individuals possess a “sense of jus-

tice”, they will concern themselves with everyone’s well-being, and not simply their own and that of those close to them (p. 143). We should rely on prudence and sympathy to motivate duty fulfilment only in the absence of a commitment to justice.

However, Gilabert’s brief account the motivational mechanisms that serve to secure aid to the global poor does not account for a key element of human moral psychology and this is that what we are willing to do for others, even as a matter of justice, is deeply connected to our sense of how much doing so will cost. A fuller account of motivation must confront the fact that there are many people who will be willing to contribute to poverty eradication at some costs, but not at others. In other words, it may well be that people are indeed willing to “sacrifice” some of their well-being in the name of improving the others’ well-being, abroad, but they may not be willing to contribute in ways that they believe are “too much”. This distinction derives from an observation that Peter Singer made in his seminal article “Famine, Affluence and Morality”, between stronger and more moderate accounts of the duties we have to alleviate poverty.³ In his account, we have very strong duties to alleviate poverty – such that we should be willing to give up nearly everything. But, Singer observed, such a view, while right, seemed unlikely to gain traction, and he was therefore willing to support a more moderate requirement, according to which we must be willing to contribute to the project of eradicating poverty, but where we are not obligated to make significant sacrifices. The concession Singer made is an important one, since it acknowledges that there is a deep connection between our motivation to carry out what justice requires and what it will “cost” us to do so. We might prefer that our understanding of the cost to us be irrelevant to our willingness to act justly, but any genuine account of human motivation – humans as they are, not as we might like them to be – cannot ignore the effect of this on our willingness to contribute to poverty eradication, beyond the boundaries of our state in particular.

Why mention this? Because, one question one might like to ask of Gilabert is precisely this: what should we expect the costs to us to be, of alleviating poverty? Gilabert’s answer is ambiguous. Over the course of the first many pages of the book, there are multiple, abstract, claims about what these costs are. Consider these examples: on p. 32, Gilabert tells us that meeting our basic positive duties towards the least well off requires “slight or moderate sacrifices”; on p. 27 he tells us that doing so is “possible, indeed, not very expensive.” Later (p. 38), Gilabert tells us that we can carry out our duties by transferring a “very modest part of our aggregate income.” And later still, Gilabert says that we can carry out our duties at “a rather minimal cost to ourselves” (p. 46) and then, again, that we can do so at “relatively low cost” (p. 47) and then again that we can do so at “reasonable cost” to ourselves (p. 51). Gilabert may prefer to avoid a direct response, since the answer to him is obvious: we ought to be prepared to contribute in non-trivial ways to the alleviation of poverty. Articulating a more pre-

cise cost to those he is trying to get on board may therefore not be a priority. But, if we're serious about considering – even for reasons *only* connected to feasibility – the motivations that press individuals into action, we need to attend to the very real fact that uncertainty about the costs one is likely to incur can have a damaging effect on motivation. Note that my claim is *not* that our lack of motivation to carry out duties of justice towards the global poor determines the content of our duties.⁴ My claim is simply that we must be more attentive than Gilabert is to the operation of ordinary moral psychology in persuading others of the importance of carrying out duties of justice.

One reason that identifying the relevant costs is complicated, for Gilabert, may have to do with the various ways in which the objectives at which we should aim are characterized. As Gilabert describes them, the objectives of a global egalitarian view are to meet the “basic socioeconomic human rights”, which include “food, housing, basic health care and basic education” (p. 5). This statement is clear enough. Yet, over the course of the early pages of the book, this objective is described differently – as responding to the “demands of the destitute” (p. 37); as “eradicating destitution” (p. 39); “eradicating poverty” (p. 40); “eradicate extreme poverty of the Destitute” (p. 46); as having a target of “developing autonomous agency” (p. 48); as having the goal of “alleviating suffering” (p. 51); to eradicate “avoidable destitution” (p. 56); to respond to “urgent claims of the Destitute” (p. 57). These objectives seem distinct, however. In particular, not only does it seem that meeting the urgent claims of the destitute is likely to have more motivational purchase than the demand to eradicate global poverty; they seem more generally to be distinguished by the relatively greater and lesser costs that they impose.⁵

As it happens, my most frequent discussions about the duties imposed on us by a commitment to global egalitarianism are with undergraduate and graduate students. Although they are committed to the *idea* of eradicating global poverty, and recognize that globally speaking they find themselves among the wealthiest, they are fairly reluctant to admit that they are bound to make significant sacrifices to get it done. One way to explain their reluctance is to dismiss it as the product of, either, their failure to empathize with others who are doing as poorly as are the global poor, or their failure to have fully absorbed the implications of the central premises of luck egalitarianism. But another, and more plausible, explanation to explain their reluctance to sign up to stringent duties might stem from their (perceived) status as relatively poorer members of Canadian society. In other words, as Catherine Lu proposed,⁶ they may be wondering why they, *qua students*, should be burdened with making sacrifices to alleviate poverty when there are other, wealthier, Canadians who can more easily shoulder this burden. If this explanation of what is making my students hesitate is correct, then what we are seeing is the strength of relational accounts of justice. Relational (or sometimes, associativist) accounts of justice are those that propose that justice only applies where people are already bound by shared, coercive,

institutions, and more generally, that people's sense of whether they are treated justly derives in part from how they believe others, with whom they share relevant connections, are treated.⁷ In this case, what my students are doing is evaluating their role (which they acknowledge to some degree) in alleviating global poverty in relation to *other Canadians'* role in doing the same. They understand their own duties of justice to be connected to the duties possessed by other Canadians. One possibility, of course, is that my students are wrong, morally speaking, in understanding whom their reference group ought to be with respect to evaluating their duties of justice. But the message we can draw from relational theories of justice, instead, is that we should understand that individuals have two reference groups, fellow citizens and the global poor, which overlap as follows: they recognize that they have duties of justice towards the global poor, but believe that the content of these duties is determined relationally in comparison to fellow citizens. The costs we are willing to bear, to eradicate global poverty, are similarly understood in relational terms.

2. SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITIES AND GLOBAL EGALITARIANISM

Given the above analysis, then, we might propose that our understanding of the duties we have towards the global poor are shaped in important ways by the special relations we share, nearly always within non-global associations of various kinds (including, but not limited to, the state) and the responsibilities that these generate for us. If this is the case, it will be helpful to turn to an analysis of Gilabert's account of special responsibilities and how they appear to complicate our ability to meet the duties imposed on us by the obligation to eradicate global poverty.

Gilabert notes a central tension between the pursuit of global egalitarianism and the importance of respecting special relationships. A commonly expressed worry about global egalitarianism is that, in meeting its demands, we shall be required to ignore our special relationships, and the duties they (appear to) impose on us; in particular, we shall have to redirect our resources from attending to the needs of our loved ones, to others who are less well-placed. To put the worry specifically, it appears at least conceivable that the duties of global egalitarianism – as Gilabert and others describe them – require us to take the resources (financial and time-wise) that we spend reading to our babies, out of a duty to them to give them a love of books, or to care for them to the best of our abilities, and so on, and direct them to solving the challenges posed by global poverty. Moreover, it appears that, to the extent that we choose to read to our babies rather than direct our attention/resources towards eradicating global poverty (or attending to the urgent needs of the destitute), we are not carrying out a duty at all, we are in fact perpetuating injustice under the guise of carrying out a duty. This strikes me and, I think, many others, as mistaken.

Gilbert's response to the "special responsibility" worry is to acknowledge at least three ways in which special duties can be justified, and therefore do not (always) pose a genuine challenge to global egalitarianism. One reason emphasizes a "moral division of labour", where we conceive duties as distributed to relevant agents for reasons of efficiency. On this view, we can justify our strong parental duties towards our own children by conceiving of parental duties as distributed to parents, for efficiency reasons. If all parents take care of their own children, then children are taken care of in general – this is an efficient way to make sure that our general duty, to ensure that children are cared for, is met.⁸ However, no one conceives their familial (nor most other special relations) in this way; describing ourselves as having duties to our loved ones only in terms of efficiency misdescribes familial relationships. Why does this matter? It matters because Gilbert is offering an account of global egalitarianism that is *feasible*, and a proper account of feasibility requires a plausible, in the sense of "makes sense to those who believe they matter," account of the nature of special duties to family members. Defending special relationships, and the duties they entail, for reasons of efficiency is suspect, especially since such reasons are defeasible where we can show that some alternative arrangement, where for example global egalitarianism is best pursued if we are denied the right to form and value friendships, is more efficient. Any feasible account of global egalitarianism must get *right* the felt value of special relationships and the *felt* importance of attendant duties, as Gilbert acknowledges.⁹

Thus, Gilbert proposes a second way to diffuse the apparent tension between special responsibilities and global egalitarianism, according to which most of our intimate relationships, and the duties they entail, can be defended for their being an "extremely important or basic good" that we all "have reason to value" (p. 60). For example, the special relations that obtain within a family are such that my "enjoyment" of them "is universally permissible and involves special obligations among those with whom we share them" (p. 60). Whereas the first attempt to diffuse the tension is inadequate for its implausibility, this second attempt suffers from a series of imprecisions that stem from the inability to identify which among our relationships are "extremely important" and therefore among our "basic goods." In particular, it is quite common among cosmopolitans to acknowledge the importance of family and friends – as extremely important or among our basic goods – and to deny the importance of co-citizen or co-national ties.

It is common among philosophers who are sceptical of the claim that states (or more specifically, nation-states) are special sites of justice to claim that these entities are a matter of historical contingency.¹⁰ Gilbert himself dismisses national ties as "clearly" of moral irrelevance since they derive from historical contingency: he writes that these merely apparent special relationships, and the duties that we believe derive from them, are borne from "clearly contingent historical formations [which] humans could avoid without fundamental losses to

their well-being” (p. 203), the implication of which is that their very contingency makes them unlikely to warrant being deemed “extremely important.” But it doesn’t appear adequate to conclude, as a result, that where these relations are “historically contingent” they cannot possibly be “extremely important”; that a relationship develops for historically contingent reasons does not appear, *prima facie*, to erase the possibility that it is morally significant. Moreover, many of our “extremely important” relations are in fact contingent. There doesn’t seem to be anything more contingent than which parents we get, but we have *prima facie* duties towards them because these contingent relations, but not others (i.e., national), are among those that we should treat as “extremely important.”¹¹

While it is clear to Gilabert that a life well-lived can, in his own case, be accomplished without (valuing, prioritizing) relations between co-nationals, the general point we should draw from Gilabert’s claim is not as clear. It cannot simply be that, because Gilabert can live a flourishing life without prioritizing the well-being of his co-nationals as a matter of duty, that the same is generally true, or should generally be true, for others. The general point that we should take away from this discussion is that it is critical that we find a way to distinguish between relationships that should be valued as “extremely important” and those that should not. No such distinction can be achieved by fiat. It is not clear that the set of relations that one person designates “extremely important” will overlap with how another person defines that set. What matters may not be identifying objectively the set of relations that can be protected for being “extremely important”, but rather giving some leeway to individuals to identify this set for themselves.

Gilabert’s third strategy for eliminating the supposed tension between special duties and the duties to eradicate global poverty is, I think, meant to be the most significant. He proposes that the reasons for which we might be inclined to prioritize special duties are not as important as the background conditions that must obtain in order to justify this prioritization. Any justification of special responsibilities, he tells us, must be “consistent with endorsement of the latter” or, differently (and more stringently) that “reference to particular contexts and attachments does not provide sufficient grounds for duties unless they do not violate cosmopolitan considerations” (p. 62). Later (p. 203), he formulates the view slightly differently, “special responsibilities [are] conditional upon compliance with certain background moral conditions....”. Thus – and he has made this claim in an earlier piece, written with Arash Abizadeh – there is no genuine tension between special duties and global egalitarianism.¹² Any apparent tension emerges simply because the demands of global egalitarianism have not yet been met.

The implications of such a statement are under-explored in *From Global Poverty to Global Equality*, however. Am I behaving in an unjustifiable way when I prioritize spending quality time with my daughter, who is very, very, cute, but admittedly very luckily privileged in relation to the situation of many other

babies born to parents who love them just as much as I love my daughter, when I could be spending that time pressing the world into moving towards global egalitarianism? Gilabert at times appears committed to the view that I am indeed behaving unjustifiably. He writes for example that the duty to help individuals in desperate need is such that I am behaving unjustifiably where I privilege someone who is well off while this desperate need persists. My reading to my daughter appears condemnable, on this account.

He also suggests, in a way that doesn't fully serve to clarify his position in my case, that "it would be wrong for me to assist A if that involves murdering B" (p. 61). This seems right and quite uncontroversial. Indeed, I don't believe myself to be implicated in the murder of others when I read to my baby girl (her current favourite is "Sound that Animals Make"); I am not thereby assisting A to murder B. But he also suggests that "You may not, in order to secure excellent opportunities for your children, support policies that make the opportunities of other children worse than those of your children" (p. 203). And now I'm genuinely unsure whether I'm meeting the standard he requires. It may depend on how strongly he means "support policies" which serve to make "the opportunities for other children worse". Is that something I do, as a matter of course, if I am not diligently focused on meeting the demands of global egalitarianism all the time? Can I be excused to spend some quality time with my daughter, without behaving condemnably, if I do enough on a regular basis to press the world into moving towards global egalitarianism (does writing a commentary on an excellent work in theories of global justice count?). In other words, how strongly we should understand Gilabert's claim is not clear. It may be that he is warning us that any prioritizing that we are *presently* in the business of doing cannot be justified morally, since a cosmopolitan world order does not presently exist. But the requirements – in particular, the costs – of global justice, in particular those that fall to the most well-off, remain unclear.

CONCLUSION

My objective in this analysis is certainly not to persuade readers that global egalitarianism is doomed, because it fails to offer a full account of the status of special relationships and the duties to which they give rise, however desirable its vision. I do believe, however, that any successful global egalitarian project must take more seriously the opportunities and the challenges posed by the existence of special relations and the responsibilities they justifiably entail. We must attend to the fact that we are, at the end of the day, *relational* beings, i.e., beings who evaluate whether we are treated fairly in relation to specific others, specific others who for now are those who live within the boundaries of our state rather than those who live in developing states. In particular, we must acknowledge that, at least with respect to offering a feasible account of global justice, the costs individuals are willing to bear for remedying global poverty cannot be disconnected from the special relations they value. It is cold comfort to ob-reserve Aboriginal Canadians with poor water quality to know that their water quality

is better than that available to citizens of developing states. That Canadians can and should attend to the inequality within Canadian borders *before* they attend to inequalities more globally is not to condone their willingness to ignore poverty globally. It is simply to observe that attending to the needs of Aboriginal Canadians does not seem to be something that can be justified *only* where our duties to alleviate global egalitarianism are met.¹³ It may be, in other words, that there are good and *moral* reasons to explain the inward focus of many citizens, and that any account of global egalitarianism must acknowledge the genuine tension between this focus and eradicating global poverty.

NOTES

- ¹ Pablo Gilabert, *From Global Poverty to Global Equality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). All references to the book will be made using brackets inside the text.
- ² I have termed this tension “ineliminable” in a piece co-written with Margaret Moore. See Patti Tamara Lenard and Margaret Moore, “Ineliminable Tension: A Reply to Abizadeh and Gilabert’s ‘is There a Genuine Tension Between Cosmopolitan Egalitarianism and Special Responsibilities?’,” *Philosophical Studies* 146, no. 3 (2009).
- ³ Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence and Morality,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972).
- ⁴ That is, I am not an internalist about justice.
- ⁵ One might propose that Gilabert’s effort is to develop an account of dynamic duties, i.e., the duties we have to create an environment in which duties towards the global poor can best be carried out, and that these are not obviously costly. That may be the case, or it may not. Either way, a feasible account of global justice requires an honest account of the costs, material and otherwise, of the duties we have.
- ⁶ She made this proposal at the workshop that gave rise to this special issue.
- ⁷ One of the best-known, and best, accounts of relational justice is Elizabeth Anderson, “What is the Point of Equality?,” *Ethics* 109, no. 2 (1999).
- ⁸ This is the strategy pursued in Robert Goodin, “What is so Special about Our Fellow Countrymen?,” *Ethics* 98, no. 4 (1988).
- ⁹ And this is the case, even if one thinks that the correct theory of justice is one that believes these relations are irrelevant from the perspective of justice. The emphasis on *feasibility* demands attentiveness to the role that special relationships play in motivating the carrying out of duties of justice.
- ¹⁰ See for example Daniel Weinstock, “Motivating the Global Demos,” *Metaphilosophy* 40, no. 1 (2009): 95.
- ¹¹ And this raises the question of how individuals whose family is abusive should respond to the claim that family relations are “evidently” of special importance and deserving of moral priority. The answer is, of course, that in these unfortunate cases, individuals should not attach significance to familial relations. But, if only family relations are protected by this second attempt to account for the tension between special responsibilities and global egalitarianism, then people whose family is abusive appear doubly unlucky (a) because they are abused and b) because it is not clear which of their special relationships will be exempt from condemnation by global egalitarians in virtue of their being extremely important and therefore as counting among one’s basic goods.
- ¹² Arash Abizadeh and Pablo Gilabert, “Is there a genuine tension between cosmopolitan egalitarianism and special responsibilities?,” *Philosophical Studies* 138(2008).
- ¹³ I am deliberately avoiding speculation on whether we currently possess the resources to eradicate poverty globally, or whether it could be that there exists what David Miller has termed a “justice gap”, i.e., the possibility that in pursuing legitimate justice claims domestically, poverty will persist (even where those who are poor have a legitimate justice claim against being poor). For more discussion, see David Miller, “Social Justice versus Global Justice,” in *Social Justice in a Global Age*, ed. Olaf Gramme and Patrick Diamond (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2009).