

## Les ateliers de l'éthique The Ethics Forum

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# Book Symposium on Pablo Gilabert's *From Global Poverty to Global Equality: A Philosophical Exploration* and Mathias Risse's *On Global Justice* Introduction

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## DOSSIER

### BOOK SYMPOSIUM ON PABLO GILABERT'S *FROM GLOBAL POVERTY TO GLOBAL EQUALITY: A PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLORATION* AND MATHIAS RISSE'S *ON GLOBAL JUSTICE*

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#### INTRODUCTION

The literature on theories of justice over the last half century has come in two waves. The first wave, triggered by Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, formulated questions about the relative privileges and burdens within the confines of a given society. The second wave, which gained momentum in the 1990s, has taken questions of distribution to the global level. Given that some of the most staggering inequalities in income, wealth, and other material as well as immaterial goods today exist between countries rather than within them, this shift in emphasis was only logical.

The present book symposium, which is based on presentations at a workshop co-hosted by the *Centre de Recherche en Éthique de l'Université de Montréal (CREUM)* and the *Groupe de Recherche Interuniversitaire en Philosophie Politique (GRIPP)* in December 2012, analyses two new and important contributions to this literature on global justice. Over the last two decades, global justice theorists have often been said to fall into two camps. Statists on the one hand, who argue that principles of egalitarian justice only exist within the confines of the state; and globalists on the other hand, who take egalitarian principles to be global in scope. Debates between these two camps, and even their labelling as such, have sometimes obscured the fact that the *scope* of our principles of justice is only a derivative feature that depends on the *grounds* of justice on which they are defended.<sup>1</sup>

One of the refreshing features of both of the books discussed in this symposium is that they leave behind the stale dichotomy between statists and globalists. For Gilabert, scope derives from identifying the factors relevant for grounding duties of justice – from what he calls *moral desirability conditions* – as well as from considerations about the prospect of discharging these duties – that is, *feasibility*

*conditions*. For Risse, scope varies with the different grounds of justice he invokes and, as he puts it, “the term ‘scope’ does not do much independent work” (Risse 2012, fn 2 on p.5).<sup>2</sup> Having said that, the grounds of justice Gilabert and Risse mobilise in their arguments, and hence the conclusions about global justice they arrive at, are far from similar.

The objective of the present symposium is to analyse and critically discuss these different grounds of justice. In this brief introduction, I will limit myself to two sets of remarks on each book. First, I shall sketch some of their central features; second, I will provide an overview of the issues taken up by the contributors to the symposium. Note that the contributions to the symposium do not represent a comprehensive analysis of the two books, but concentrate on those aspects that attracted their authors’ critical attention. Following the order at the workshop in 2012, I shall start with *On Global Justice* by Mathias Risse.

Mathias RISSE defends what he calls pluralist internationalism. His position is pluralist in the sense that it admits a number of different grounds of justice, cutting across the divide between relationalists and non-relationalists. More specifically, the grounds of justice discussed in the book are “recognizing individuals as human beings, members of states, co-owners of the earth, as subject to the global order, and as subject to a global trading system” (Risse 2012, 11). His position is internationalist, because he agrees with globalists that international relations give rise to their own principles of justice, even though they tend to be weaker than principles of justice within states. Two distinctive features of Risse’s account should be underlined here. First, his discussion of common ownership of the earth as one important ground of justice underpinning human rights that apply across borders; this central argument of the book – its discussion in Part 2 represents about a third of the book – is inspired by Hugo Grotius’ writings on the idea of common ownership of the seas. Risse mobilises this account, for example, to justify contemporary duties in the context of climate change (chapter 10) or rights to essential pharmaceuticals (chapter 12). The second distinctive feature of Risse’s account is his recognition of the normative peculiarity of states. In a context where we are unable to even imagine what a system without states would look like, this epistemic constraint forces us to restrict our “realistic utopias” to a world in which states continue to play an important role. I shall come back to this point below.

In his discussion of Risse, Arash ABIZADEH focuses on common ownership of the earth as a ground of justice. Abizadeh contests that Risse’s argument succeeds in establishing that each individual has an inalienable right to use the earth’s resources to satisfy her basic needs. Moreover, Abizadeh challenges Risse to say more on how his own view relates to the rival views of no ownership, equal division ownership and joint ownership and why it should be considered superior.

Colin FARRELLY’s assessment of Part 3 of Risse’s book critically analyses the relationship between the theoretical grounds of justice Risse invokes and the practical conclusions he arrives at. While Farrelly is sympathetic to the theoretical framework of the book, he argues that more empirical work is needed to

make Risse's conclusions stick. For instance, Farrelly maintains that mobilising Grotius' thought on common ownership of the seas to say something about intellectual property rights requires a more thorough understanding of the workings of intellectual property rights today.

The final commentary by Ryoa CHUNG revolves around the normative peculiarity attributed to the state by Risse's account. Whereas Risse considers a world without states to be an unrealistic utopia in the sense that we cannot even imagine how it would function, Chung is more sympathetic to the quote by John Lennon that Risse cites: "Imagine there's no countries, it isn't hard to do". In other words, Chung insists on the value of ideal theory even in a context where the recommendations of this theory are not immediately accessible to us.

As the title suggests, Pablo GILABERT's *From Global Poverty to Global Equality*<sup>3</sup> puts forward two normative standpoints. Part I argues that we have positive duties to eliminate global poverty; part II defends the more radical claim that duties of global justice go beyond the sufficientarian ones of part I and take the form of egalitarian duties. The two parts share three common characteristics. First, Gilabert relies on a version of Scanlonian contractualism in order to ground the demands of first sufficientarian and then egalitarian demands of justice. Second, one of the most valuable contributions of Gilabert's book consists in his original discussion of questions of feasibility. What should we make of objections that certain duties to fight poverty or to pursue equality are in fact void because they cannot be effectively discharged? In response, Gilabert not only provides an insightful typology of different aspects of feasibility – for instance by way of distinguishing questions of *accessing* certain morally desirable states of affairs from their *stability* – but he also points out that apart from a number of "hard", that is for instance physical or biological, feasibility constraints, the limits of feasibility are flexible. Thus, he introduces the idea of *dynamic duties*, which involve "the expansion of the feasible sets of political action" (Gilabert 2012, 138). For example, suppose we cannot attain global equality today. We may still have dynamic duties to bring about a world in which our chances of doing so are better. Third, and finally, it is an important feature of Gilabert global egalitarianism that it is constructed on what he calls humanist (others might say non-relationist) rather than associativist (relationist) grounds. While he does not deny the existence of associativist duties, he argues that they tend to be weaker than the humanist kind on which his argument relies.

In her comments on Gilabert, Patti LENARD probes the robustness of his duties of global justice when confronted with the special relationships human beings have with others. How can global egalitarians of Gilabert's outlook justify that individuals should give priority to egalitarian duties of global justice to distant others over duties they have to their families, compatriots, and members of other communities they are part of? Using Gilabert's categories, this is an important question both in terms of moral desirability – is there priority from a normative perspective? – and in terms of feasibility – can individuals be motivated to respect this priority?

Robert SPARLING's assessment of chapter 3 referees the debate between Gilabert's global egalitarianism and the libertarian objections to it put forward by authors like Jan Narveson. While Sparling suggests that Gilabert's position more than holds his own in this debate, he argues that it has two important weaknesses. First, Gilabert's position would benefit from a sustained analysis of the empirical conditions – concerning foreign aid, international trade and so on – under which his egalitarian duties can be realised. Second, the libertarian insistence on self-determination points to a potential conflict between justice and democracy that Gilabert seems to underestimate.

Colin MACLEOD focuses on the central theme of feasibility in Gilabert's work, and suggests that Gilabert equivocates between moral justification and strategic justification. Whereas Gilabert maintains that limited social influencability in a given context has an impact on the *actual* obligations individuals hold, Macleod replies that the obligations as such do not change. The only thing that might change is the *strategic* justification – one might for instance adopt a more moderate political goal that does not fully respond to our moral obligation, but has better chances of success. Macleod adds a stimulating discussion on the question of demandingness as a feasibility constraint. The question of whether redistributive demands on the rich are morally demanding, he argues, depends on whether they have acquired their riches in a just way.

Finally, Christine STRAEHLE's comments on chapters 5 and 6 of the book concentrate on the role that appeals to individual autonomy play in Gilabert's argument. If the objective of the humanist principles of global justice that Gilabert defends is to realise a level of well-being and individual autonomy, then, so Strachle argues, a precise account of autonomy is required in order to be able to specify the global duties of justice we hold. She discusses a number of conceptions of autonomy we find in the literature, but concludes that it is not clear that Gilabert appeals to any of these or to a different conception of autonomy sufficiently well defined to play the above role.

To round the symposium off, both authors respond to the critical remarks put forward by the commentators. I will not detail their responses here. Instead, I would like to close this introduction by pointing out one of the ways in which the two books offer us radically different perspectives on global justice. The contrast I have in mind lies in their treatment of feasibility constraints. Risse's reaction to strong feasibility constraints, as mentioned above, is to accept them as constraints on what we should do. The goal, in other words, is to formulate a "realistic" utopia. For example, there is no point aiming at a global order without states, because we cannot even imagine what it would look like. Gilabert, by contrast, uses his idea of dynamic duties to constantly push the boundaries of the politically possible. If there is a morally desirable state of the world that is not accessible from here and now, our task consists in working towards making it possible tomorrow. Finding a balance between these two perspectives is one of the central both theoretical and practical challenges for global justice today.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Authors who have recently criticised the framing of the global justice debate in terms of statism *versus* globalism include for instance Joshua Cohen and Charles Sabel, “Extra Republican Nulla Justitia?” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 34/2 (2006), 147-75; A.J. Julius, “Nagel’s Atlas”, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 34/2 (2006), 176-92; Miriam Ronzoni, “The Global Order: A Case of Background Injustice? A Practice-Dependent Account”, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 37/3 (2009), 229-56; Laura Valentini, *Justice in a Globalized World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- <sup>2</sup> Mathias Risse, *On Global Justice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).
- <sup>3</sup> Pablo Gilabert, *From Global Poverty to Global Equality: A Philosophical Explanation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).