

Two Pictures of the Global-justice Debate: A Reply to Tan*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Kok-Chor Tan’s review essay offers an internal critique of my perspective on global justice. Tan grants my coercion-based account of the triggers of justice-obligations, but takes issue with my claim that, on that account, “global justice requires more than statist assistance, but less than full-blown cosmopolitan equality” (Valentini 2011: 20, quoted in Tan 2014: 201). In particular, Tan thinks that, at the very least, my denial that egalitarian justice applies globally is under-argued. Principles of international/global justice, he suggests, may well differ *in content* from principles of domestic justice, but this need not mean that they are not *egalitarian in form*. For example, he asks: “why can’t the global trade regime be governed by a principle that says that the gains of trade should be equally distributed among the relevant parties as a default (with specifications on when departure from this default is admissible, as when it advantages the less advantaged)?” (Tan 2014: 204-5). This principle differs in content from the principles of justice that liberals defend at the domestic level—which do not concern the gains from trade—yet it seems egalitarian in form. And on the face of it, Tan suggests, there appears to be little in my coercion-based account that rules it out as a candidate demand of global justice.

Tan’s thoughtful discussion gives me a welcome opportunity to clarify a misunderstanding about my view, which I suspect drives his critique. Tan takes me to hold that “whatever [is] required for global justice, it will not include egalitarian commitments” (Tan 2014: 204). But this is not what I argue in *Justice in a Globalized World*. Instead, I only deny that “the egalitarian principles liberals adopt to assess domestic distributions of liberties, opportunities, and economic goods should apply to the world at large” (Valentini 2001: 6, emphasis removed). The expression “full-blown cosmopolitan equality” in the passage quoted by Tan does not refer to formally egalitarian principles in general, but to one specific class of such principles.

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Once this semantic difference in our understandings of “cosmopolitan equality” is clarified, our perceived disagreement on whether there could be principles of global justice that are egalitarian in form disappears. The semantic difference, though, reveals what is probably a deeper dispute between the two of us: a “meta-dispute” about what the debate on global justice is, or should be, about. Tan and I operate with different pictures of that debate.

To better substantiate these claims, in what follows, I will (i) characterize the controversy between cosmopolitans and statists, (ii) sketch my position in *Justice in a Globalized World* and, on this basis, (iii) outline where I suspect the disagreement between Tan and myself really lies.

2. COSMOPOLITANISM AND STATISM

In *Justice in a Globalized World*, I aim to offer an account of international justice that steers a middle course between statism and cosmopolitanism. These two perspectives, as I characterize them in the book, offer different answers to what I call “the question of extension”, namely “whether [liberal-egalitarian] principles of domestic justice should extend to the world at large” (Valentini 2011: 5). Cosmopolitans answer the question in the affirmative, statists in the negative.¹

Before proceeding further, it is worth noting that Tan’s critical discussion of my book appears to be implicitly conducted *not* against the background of this question, but of a different one: “What socio-economic distributive principles, if any, apply beyond borders?”² This question is both narrower and broader than the one I address in the book. It is broader insofar as it does not focus exclusively on *justice*. It is narrower insofar as it concentrates on the distribution of a specific class of goods, i.e., socio-economic goods, while justice *simpliciter* ranges over other types of goods too (e.g., liberties).³

Having said that, the contrast between statism and cosmopolitanism I draw in *Justice in a Globalized World* can be recast as a disagreement about socio-economic distribution, and thereby rephrased in terms of different answers to the question implicitly underpinning Tan’s critique. To do so, let me begin by noting that principles concerning the distribution of socio-economic goods may differ along the following three dimensions: their *grounds* (G); the distributive *pattern* they mandate (P); and the *recipients* of the relevant

1. In Valentini (2011: 6-10) I offer an overview of these two positions. Furthermore, chs. 2 and 3 of the book discuss cosmopolitanism; chs. 4 and 5 discuss statism.

2. This emerges from the section of Tan’s review titled “Poverty and Global Inequality: Humanitarian and Egalitarian Duties”.

3. By “socio-economic goods” I mean resources broadly construed. For simplicity, I do not problematize how exactly socio-economic goods are conceptualized, namely the relevant “distribuendum”. For discussion see Gosepath 2011.

distribuendum (R). The general structure of these principles is the following: “Ground G requires socio-economic goods to be distributed in line with pattern P between recipients R”. Different ways of specifying parameters G, P, and R lead to substantively different socio-economic distributive principles. Statists and cosmopolitans specify the parameters differently.

First, all cosmopolitans hold that *justice* grounds global distributive obligations. Justice is a special type of moral concern, one that generates obligations correlative to rights, which are in principle rightfully enforceable. For instance, the obligation to pay the (fair) price for a good that one has purchased is a paradigmatic obligation of justice: it is correlative to the seller’s right to payment and in principle rightfully enforceable, e.g., by the state. Justice is contrasted with *humanity*. Obligations of humanity are neither correlative to rights, nor rightfully enforceable. They require us to help needy strangers, using resources to which we are *entitled* on grounds of justice (Barry 1991; Buchanan 1987). While both cosmopolitans and statists hold that obligations of humanity apply across borders, for *some* statists humanity exhausts our international distributive obligations. Concerns of justice simply do not arise beyond the state (Nagel 2005).

Second, cosmopolitans hold that socio-economic goods should be distributed in accordance with *broadly egalitarian* distributive patterns. In other words, they are concerned with global relative as opposed to absolute deprivation. Statists, by contrast, are unanimously committed to *sufficientarian* distributive patterns: for them, international justice requires that all relevant recipients have “enough” socio-economic goods. Once the relevant threshold is met for all recipients, inequalities above that threshold are not morally significant.

Third, cosmopolitans hold that the recipients of global socio-economic justice are *individual human beings*. Statists, by contrast, focus on internally legitimate *political communities*.

In sum, cosmopolitans typically argue that global justice is domestic justice writ large, and requires egalitarian socio-economic distributions between individuals.⁴ This is the sense in which they answer the “question of extension” in the affirmative. Statists, instead, either argue that there is no such thing as “socio-economic justice beyond borders” (only global humanity), or require justice-based sufficientarian distribution between states (Rawls 1999; Miller 2007; Blake 2001). Against this backdrop, in *Justice in a Globalized World*, I articulate a view that attempts to steer a coherent middle course between these two families of positions.

4. In turn, this conclusion may be defended on either relational, or non-relational grounds. For the former, see e.g. Beitz 1999 and Pogge 1989. For the latter, see e.g. Caney 2005 and Beitz 1983.

3. A BRIEF SKETCH OF MY VIEW

After exposing what I take to be the shortcomings of cosmopolitanism and statism (Valentini 2011: chs. 2, 3, 4, and 5), I develop a coercion-based account of the “triggers” of principles of justice (Valentini 2011: ch. 6). I start from the liberal premise that individuals have a right to a mutually justifiable distribution of freedom, one under which each enjoys the social conditions to lead an autonomous life. Since coercion always involves non-trivial restrictions of freedom, instances of coercion stand in need of justification: they must be shown to be consistent with a mutually justifiable distribution of freedom between the parties involved (Valentini 2011: ch. 7). I call the principles establishing the conditions under which coercion is justified “principles of justice”.

It is important to emphasize that my notion of coercion is somewhat heterodox.⁵ I do not equate coercion with the imposition of commands backed by the threat of sanctions but, more broadly, with the imposition of non-trivial constraints on freedom. Moreover, I suggest that coercion so understood comes in two variants. It can be perpetrated either by an agent (*interactional coercion*) or caused by a system of rules supported by a large enough number of agents (*systemic coercion*). From my perspective, both interactional and systemic coercion stand in need of justification.

Equipped with this normative framework, I argue that what principles of justice apply beyond borders—at any given time—depends on the forms of coercion existing in the international arena. In today’s world, both interactional and systemic coercion are present. Instances of interactional coercion primarily involve states as collective agents (e.g., think about aggression or bilateral state relations more generally). Instances of systemic coercion involve global or near-global systems of rules such as those sustaining the global economy (trade and finance).⁶

I argue that the justification of international interactional coercion demands respect for the sovereign equality of internally legitimate (i.e., reasonably just) states. Sovereign equality, in turn, requires every state to be in a position to control their affairs without being continuously interfered with or subtly dominated by other states and non-state actors. For example, consider the influence exercised by the United States over Latin American countries during the Cold War; or the influence that powerful corporations exercise over weak states. While states susceptible to these forms of

5. It thereby differs from other coercion-based accounts of the triggers of demands of justice, such as the one offered by Blake 2001.

6. In Valentini (2011: 193), I am explicit, however, that the rules governing the global economy need not exhaust global systemic coercion.

interference may be “formally sovereign”, they are much less sovereign, from a substantive point of view, than others (Valentini 2011: 191).⁷

My account of the justification of global systemic coercion is more tentative—as I admit in the book, and Tan rightly notes. In particular, I argue that the rules governing global finance and trade should be compatible with a mutually justifiable distribution of freedom among those falling under their purview: states and their citizens. Having said that, I also note that “[g]iven the cultural diversity and social complexity characterizing the global economy, instead of aiming for a specific and complete account of what global socio-economic justice requires, we are [...] on firmer ground simply establishing what it must exclude” (Valentini 2011: 200).⁸ I then go on to offer a few examples of policy reforms that would lead in this direction—including the implementation of more equitable rules in WTO settings, and the creation of institutions to combat harmful tax-competition and global financial volatility. Since I am not offering a full picture of what global justice, at the systemic level, requires, but merely pointing to practices that it must exclude, my account is rather open-ended. What I offer, as the book’s subtitle suggests, is a “normative framework” for thinking about global justice, rather than a definitive account of what global justice positively requires.

4. WHAT TAN AND I REALLY DISAGREE ABOUT

Based on this sketch of the view in my book, it should be transparent that I do not deny that the “global trade regime [should] be governed by a principle that says that the gains of trade should be equally distributed among the relevant parties as a default” (Tan 2014: 204-5); or indeed that principles of justice that are *egalitarian in form* should apply beyond borders. Unlike other critics of cosmopolitan egalitarianism, I simply remain agnostic about this. I adopt a minimalist strategy suggesting only what global systemic coercion must exclude in order to avoid being unjust for sure. In light of this, I could perhaps be reasonably criticized for saying too little. But Tan thinks I say too much, specifically, that “whatever [...] will be required for global justice, it will not include egalitarian commitments” (Tan 2014: 204).

I suspect that this misunderstanding is prompted by my claim that, on my view “global justice requires more than statist assistance, but less than full-blown cosmopolitan equality” (Valentini 2011: 20). Tan reads

7. For related discussion, see Ronzoni 2012.

8. In Valentini (2011: Ch. 7), I draw a very similar conclusion in relation to *domestic* principles of justice concerning the distribution of income and wealth. I accept that domestic justice requires equality in the distribution of civil and political liberties, as well as opportunities, but I claim that “[w]hat economic inequalities are permissible beyond [a] basic-needs threshold is a question to be answered on a case-by-case basis, and which should be ultimately decided through the democratic decision procedures of each political community” (19 and 176-77).

the emphasis of this sentence as being on “equality”, and from this infers that I am generally averse to any form of egalitarianism beyond borders. But that sentence, and the book more generally, express aversion to “full-blown *cosmopolitan* equality”. As I have explained earlier, by this I mean the view that the principles of egalitarian socio-economic justice that apply domestically should extend globally, in the world as it is today. So I agree with Tan that “egalitarian commitments can take different shapes, and there is nothing in the ideal that egalitarian justice has global reach that requires global principles to be replicas of domestic principles” (Tan 2014: 206). The book does not argue against egalitarian commitments so broadly construed.

Having said that, Tan’s reading of what I say may reveal a deeper disagreement between the two of us. For Tan, “ultimately the dispute concerning global distributive justice remains a dispute between two basic forms of global obligations —egalitarianism versus sufficientarianism” (Tan 2014: 207). That is, Tan seems to focus exclusively—at least in his response—on disagreements concerning the *distributive pattern* mandated by principles of international political morality (probably taking “individuals” for granted as the relevant recipients). But as I have suggested above, principles of global socio-economic justice might differ along other dimensions too, specifically: *grounds and recipients*.⁹ I take these further dimensions of disagreement to be central to the cosmopolitan-statist controversy as I understand it, namely the controversy I address in the book.¹⁰ It should thus be no surprise that much of the book is concerned with those other dimensions as well (especially grounds) and thereby somewhat de-emphasizes the centrality of the “sufficiency versus equality” contrast.

Once those other dimensions are taken into account, contrary to what Tan suggests, it is not true that “there is no third category or third wave of global distributive justice” (Tan 2014: 207).¹¹ My view—whether one finds it plausible

9. As I said earlier, the specific nature of the “distribuendum” is also a possible, and important, locus of disagreement, which I omit here for brevity’s sake.

10. Tan might object that “[o]ne does not forfeit one’s cosmopolitan egalitarian credentials just because one offers a global principle that specifies the limits of acceptable inequality differently from a domestic principle” (Tan 2014: 215). This strikes me as a matter of definition, with little substantive import. What is more, I myself acknowledge a distinction between “strong cosmopolitanism” (i.e., the direct extension of domestic egalitarian justice to the global realm), and “weak cosmopolitanism”, which “places limits on permissible global socio-economic inequalities without insisting that they should coincide with those placed on domestic ones” (Valentini 2011: 16-17). In Valentini (2011: Ch. 3), after an extensive critique of strong cosmopolitanism—my main target—I provisionally suggest that a “weaker” cosmopolitan position may be more defensible (without endorsing it).

11. The claim isn’t true even if it is understood as meaning that principles of global distributive justice *can* only be either egalitarian or sufficientarian. Here are two simple counter-examples: “The gains of trade should be distributed so as to maximize the sum-total of utility” and “The gains of trade should be distributed in proportion to participants’ contributions”. These distributive principles exhibit neither a sufficientarian nor an egalitarian pattern.

or not— can be described as occupying a middle ground between statism and cosmopolitanism. Specifically, like cosmopolitanism and some (but not all) variants of statism, my view holds that demands of socio-economic justice apply beyond borders. Unlike cosmopolitanism, however, the view also acknowledges that states —provided they are internally legitimate— are important subjects of international justice. And unlike statism, it implies that global justice demands something more than the transfer of resources between “independent” political communities aimed at meeting a given threshold of sufficiency (what I call “statist assistance”): it requires deep restructuring of the rules governing international finance and trade, so as to remove clearly unjustifiable constraints on the freedom of states and their citizens.

5. CONCLUSION

Tan and I do not disagree about the possibility that international/global socio-economic justice might include principles exhibiting an egalitarian distributive pattern. Tan’s discussion of my work has been helpful in giving me the opportunity to clarify this point. That said, Tan and I may well disagree about the relative importance of the “equality versus sufficiency” distinction in the global-justice debate, and possibly about how other parameters within that debate —e.g. grounds and recipients— should be specified.

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