



Why (Some) Corporations Have Positive Duties to (Some of) the Global Poor

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Abstract

Many corporations are large, powerful, and wealthy. There are massive shortfalls of global justice, with hundreds of millions of people in the world living below the threshold of extreme poverty, and billions more living not far above that threshold. Where injustice and needs shortfalls must be remediated, we often look towards agents' capabilities to determine who ought to bear the costs of rectifying the situation. The combination of these three claims grounds what I call a 'linkage-based' account of why corporations have demanding positive duties to the global poor. In this paper, I put forward a distinctive linkage-based account of corporations' positive duties centred on the idea of dependence and the importance of meeting agents' core needs. In addition to outlining and defending this account, I will show that we can utilise its basic conceptual components to make headway on questions that have received insufficient attention in the business ethics literature; specifically, we can say something substantive about the weighting of needy agents' competing claims to assistance, and about the limits to the demands that can be lodged against corporations on the basis of others' unmet needs. Having integrated considerations of duties' grounding, their comparative weight, and the limits of their demandingness into a single account of corporate positive duty, I conclude by discussing a challenge to attributing to corporations duties owed to the worst-off amongst the global poor.

Keywords Needs · Dependence · Partiality

Introduction

Many corporations are large, powerful, and wealthy. There are massive shortfalls of global justice, with hundreds of millions of people in the world living below the threshold of extreme poverty, and billions more living not far above that threshold. Where injustice and needs shortfalls must be remediated, we often look towards agents' capabilities to determine who ought to bear the costs of rectifying the situation (see e.g. Singer, 1972; Unger, 1996; Miller, 2007; Lichtenberg 2014; for discussion, see Barry & Overland, 2016, Chaps. 1–3). The combination of these three claims grounds an intuitively compelling case for attributing to corporations a demanding set of positive duties owed to the global poor. Call all those accounts which, like the above, match claim-holders to duty-bearers primarily on the basis of the latter agents' abilities to rectify the situation

'linkage-based accounts'. Such accounts differ from one another both with regards to the specific nature of the shortfalls they seek to rectify and how they describe the connection between the capable and the needy agents in question.

In this paper, I put forward a distinctive linkage-based account of corporations' positive duties (henceforth simply 'duties') centred on the idea of dependence and the importance of meeting people's core needs. In putting forward such an account, I hope to make four distinct contributions to the literature. First, to introduce the aforementioned dependence-based account (see Sect. 2), which produces different—and, I believe, more plausible—conclusions than other linkage-based accounts (discussed in Sect. 1). Second, I will show that in utilising the basic conceptual components of this account, we can say something substantive about the *weighting* of people's competing claims to assistance (Sect. 2). Third, I will show that we can appeal to the same conceptual components to produce a novel account of the *limits* to the demands that can be lodged against corporations on the basis of others' unmet needs (Sect. 3). Fourth, having integrated considerations of duties' grounding, their comparative weight, and the limits of their demandingness into a

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single account of corporate positive duty, I discuss an important further challenge to determining what corporations owe to the global poor, hitherto overlooked (Sect. 4). Specifically, I show that whilst corporations may have demanding duties to the badly off, corporations may be off the hook when it comes to aiding the world's very worst-off given the risks and costs of investing or relocating their businesses in the globally worst-off regions. Whilst there is value just in excavating this challenge and opening it up for further investigation, I conclude by putting forward a tentative response by arguing that whilst corporations may genuinely be insulated from duties to relocate to such regions, they are not entirely off the hook with respect to the world's worst-off; rather, their duties to such agents will typically be collectively, rather than individually held.

Linkage-Based Accounts of Corporate Duty

There are countless arguments in the business ethics literature which purport to show the existence of positive corporate duties. In this paper, I will be concerned with a subset of these, those which I call 'linkage-based arguments'. Such arguments have been used by several prominent authors in the field to identify various different duties held by corporations (see e.g. Santoro, 2000, 2009; Young, 2004, 2011; Dunfee, 2006; Wettstein, 2009, 2010; Wood, 2012). What unifies linkage-based arguments is that they each ground moral duties in (i) a shortfall in the needs or entitlements of one agent, (ii) a relationship (construed broadly) between that agent and another, and (iii) a capacity on the part of the second agent to do something about the shortfall (typically at a reasonable, non-excessive cost). One virtue such accounts have relative to rival approaches to establishing duties¹ is that they allow us to travel light—one does not need to subscribe to a comprehensive theory of justice or a contentious theory of the legal and political nature of the corporation to feel the pull of linkage-based reasons for ascribing duties.² Travelling so lightly is not always a virtue, of course, but it likely is when we're concerned with assigning duties to rectify urgent calamities such as chronic global immiseration. As Judith Lichtenberg observes, "you don't need industrial

strength ethical theory to know that it would be better if billions of people didn't live in dire poverty" (2010, p. 135).

Whether identified through a linkage-based account or otherwise, discussions of corporations' positive duties have largely focused on *whether* such duties can be justified, and how. Whilst the importance of thinking through the upper limits of duties' demandingness has been acknowledged in passing (see e.g. Santoro, 2000; Hsieh, 2009; Strudler, 2017), authors have considered the matter only briefly, if at all.³ Rarer still is any effort to weigh a certain set of putative positive duties against another—it is rarely considered, for instance, how a corporation's duties to support charitable causes (see e.g. Ohreen & Petry, 2012) meshes with, or pulls against, its duties to pay a certain level of wages to its workers (see e.g. Kates, 2019). Completely absent is any effort to integrate considerations of duties' grounding, their comparative weight, and the limits of their demandingness into a single account of corporate duty, as I seek to do below. Yet failing to integrate each of the three considerations with one another, by considering one to the neglect of the others, ends up producing ad hoc guidance for corporate action.

To see the issue here, take two linkage-based arguments for distinctive corporate duties, those of Dunfee (2006) and Wood (2012). Dunfee argues that corporations with "unique human catastrophe rescue competencies" (2006, p. 186) have a duty to use those competencies to alleviate the relevant sorts of human catastrophes. Dunfee is clear that in ordinary circumstances he does not take business corporations to have demanding positive duties to stakeholders; "beyond areas of legal compulsion", he believes, "firms have moral free space" to decide whether and in what form to concern themselves with social issues (2006, p. 190). Because the proposal Dunfee is concerned with defending—roughly, that pharmaceutical companies have an obligation to support and invest in efforts to tackle the AIDS epidemic in Africa—"imposes an exceptional burden, it must be limited to truly exceptional circumstances" (2006, p. 190). The problem

³ One partial exception is Hsieh (2004) who appeals to Murphy (2003). Murphy's account limits our duties of beneficence through a consideration of fairness—we are only required to do as much as would be required to realize justice if all other agents did what was required of them. Whilst philosophically neat, the sort of hypothetical calculation necessitated by this account blunts its promise as an action-guiding principle. It is possible that Hsieh himself was unsatisfied with his earlier appeal to Murphy, as in later work he seems to think the question of corporate demandingness and its limits its wide open and requiring further research (2009, p. 268). Similarly, Young is profound, but not very helpful, when she suggests that the demands made upon us (where 'us' presumably includes those within corporations) may be "potentially infinite", with the tension between our interpersonal and global obligations being "irreducible, even tragic", insofar as their respective demands entail that we can never truly balance the moral ledger, and never fully discharge our ethical duties (2011, p. 163).

¹ See e.g. Hsieh (2009), McMahon (2012), and Singer (2019).

² Admittedly, this is less true for some linkage-based theorists than others. Santoro, for instance, seeks to embed his account in an underlying implicit social contract between businesses and societies, building on the work of Donaldson and Dunfee (1999). Wettstein grounds his account of positive duties in an account of multinational corporations as quasi-governmental institutions, who thus inherit obligations on the basis of their authoritative position within the international economy (2009).

with such a claim is that it seeks to limit the demandingness of agents' moral duties on the basis of past action and social norm (against which we are to judge what constitutes 'exceptional' burden), rather than on any evaluation of the moral force of persons' claims on corporations, or of the scope of corporations' own moral prerogatives.⁴ Moreover, Dunfee's arguments give no reason to accept that some intense needs (in his discussion, those of actual and potential AIDS victims) place onerous demands on agents uniquely placed to help, whilst similarly intense but far more common chronic shortfalls of need (e.g. of those suffering from or vulnerable to starvation) place no onerous demands at all on the myriad corporations who could each provide substantial help in alleviating such shortfalls.

Stepan Wood's argument for corporations' human rights duties (2012) is beset by similar shortcomings. Wood makes a case for corporations having positive duties to promote human rights where they have "leverage" (2012, p. 63) with respect to a relevant human rights violation or shortfall. Wood claims that corporations have leverage of the relevant kind when they have morally significant connections either with rights-violating agents, or the victims of human rights violations, and where the corporation can do something to alleviate any human rights shortfalls at a reasonable cost to itself. Yet whilst I believe it succeeds in terms of the task it sets itself (to establish that corporations have positive human rights duties), Wood's discussion says nothing about why human rights claims generate demanding duties on corporations whilst shortfalls of equal moral seriousness coming from, say, everyday deprivation do not.⁵ Equally, despite the vast amount of ongoing suffering which wealthy corporations could do something about, Wood assumes like Dunfee that, so long as corporations are not too closely connected with those suffering a serious shortfall, they have

⁴ Similar worries apply to Wettstein's effort to limit corporations' duties according to what public deliberation would deem reasonable (2009, pp. 139–144)—such deliberation will inevitably be shaped by current social understandings of the role of corporations. In any case, such deliberation will require, as deliberative inputs, moral arguments regarding where we ought to draw the lines of demandingness of the sort which I provide in the third section.

⁵ For an argument regarding the special significance of human rights, to which Wood could appeal, see Wettstein (2012, pp. 176–181). Whilst some accounts of human rights are expansive enough to render the above objection moot, insofar as all morally serious shortfalls could be cashed out in terms of human rights, it is clear from Wood's discussion that he does not view his leverage-based account as providing support for, say, corporations directly aiding the globally malnourished. Indeed, if Wood did have this more expansive understanding of human rights in mind, it would only reinforce the need for him to deal with questions of duties' comparative weight and their demandingness, given that such questions follow on immediately from the adoption of such a broad interpretation of the claims for which corporations are on the hook.

no responsibility for rectifying it. He thinks it absurd, for instance, that "a prosperous Canadian company with no operations, sources of supply, shareholders or consumers in Cambodia would have a responsibility to help improve the lot of Cambodian children, simply because it can" (2012, p. 77). Yet if we grant that intense need generates claims upon others (as Wood's own linkage-based account assumes), then the Cambodian children's needs must generate claims on *someone*. And, if nobody else is responsive to the needs of the Cambodian children, and the Canadian company was aware of their shortfall, why would the Canadian company be entitled to completely ignore their plight, only to instead undertake what may be a morally trivial uses of its resources? Wood is right to note that, generally speaking, " 'can' does not imply 'ought'" (2012, p. 78), but surely, in the face of urgent need, which agents can help is indeed a very important consideration. In any case, Wood gives no further argument for why capacity alone is insufficient.⁶ Wood, like Dunfee, thus assumes an ad hoc limit on what can be demanded of corporations.

Dunfee's and Wood's discussions are typical of the literature on corporate positive duties insofar as they each lack any sort of serious reckoning with the comparative weight of various agents' potential claims to assistance, and a non-arbitrary grounds for limiting the demands made on corporations where they can use their resources to alleviate intensive need. To be sure, these theoretical lacunae are understandable enough. A few decades ago, attributing demanding positive duties to corporations represented a pulling against the strong tide of shareholder primacy and Friedmanesque precepts (see Friedman, 1970). In such an epistemic context, establishing the existence of such duties is certainly the first port of call. By now, however, the tide has decisively turned, and many of us now believe that corporations do indeed bear often-demanding positive duties.⁷ Given this, at least some share of our collective attention should turn to second-order questions concerning the comparative weight and demandingness of corporations' positive duties.

On this score, a recent paper by Berkey (2021) represents an important contribution to the literature. Berkey's main aim is to defend a novel account of wage exploitation. In doing so, however, he also makes the case that corporations have positive duties to the global poor, and that we should therefore see their decisions concerning, amongst other

⁶ He does give three brief arguments, borrowed from Sorell (2004), which correctly show that wealth and capacity to help are not the only determinant of agents' duties, but none speak directly to the suggestion that wealth and capacity to help are nonetheless sufficient to generate duties in a world characterised by widespread and intense deprivation.

⁷ See Dubbink and Van Liedekerke (2014) for a good discussion on this paradigm shift.

things, where to locate and relocate against the background of these duties. Berkey suggests several reasons, albeit briefly, for why corporations may have such duties. First, many corporations have the capacity to make a significant difference to the global poor, and we often attribute duties to those most capable of fulfilling them. Second, several plausible theories of distributive justice suggest that giving economic opportunities to badly off agents is morally preferable to giving those same opportunities to better-off agents. Third, he argues that corporations are beneficiaries of the structural injustice from which the global poor suffer, and beneficiaries of injustice, he argues, have duties to those who are unjustly disadvantaged.⁸ In making his case, he puts forward an example of a US-based company deciding to set up a new production site, where the decision of where to locate the site is between cities in the US, China, and Bangladesh. Berkey argues that given the vast discrepancy between the welfare levels of US workers, on the one hand, and those in China or Bangladesh on the other, to locate the site in the USA and to hire those workers instead of the Chinese or Bangladeshi ones would be morally akin to giving what could be life-saving medicine not to those who need it to live, but instead to someone who needs it to alleviate their moderate back-pain (2021, p. 50).

Whilst Berkey focuses on the duty to weigh the claims of differently situated potential workers, there is a more general insight to be gleaned from the above-noted analogy: given widespread and intensive global deprivation, corporations' use of resources—no matter to what purpose—will always come with high moral opportunity costs. Given this, corporate actions must always be justified, whether on the basis that they are morally better than alternatives, or on the basis that the corporation has some prerogative to pursue certain goals, even where these are not as morally important as the alternative courses of action might be. Guides to corporate moral action, then, must be able to give corporations the tools to weigh competing claims against each other, and to justify those instances where the corporation is entitled to withhold its resources for its own ends. In the next two sections, I develop my own linkage-based account, with the aim of showing how it allows us to establish the existence, relative weight, and limits of corporations' positive duties.

The Dependence-Based Account

I define dependence as follows: an agent, A, depends upon another agent, B, to the extent that B plays a role in how A will, or has the best chance to meet their own needs. Dependence, so defined, can be either strong or weak. Dependence is strong to the extent that B is an *integral* (i.e. non-substitutable) part of how A will, or has the best chance to, meet their *core* needs. Dependence is weak to the extent that B is a substitutable part of A's plans, or it is only the attainment of A's peripheral (i.e. non-core) needs in which B plays an integral part. Strong dependence, then, entails a far more direct connection between the actions of the depended-upon agent, B, and the fulfilment or frustration of A's needs, and thus generates more stringent pro tanto duties than weak dependence. So, if you ask me to drive you to the hospital, my obligation to do so is much stronger when you are suffering from a grievous head-wound than it is when you want to surprise your husband, a nurse, at work. Of course, it would still be kind of me to drive you in the latter case, but this does not rise to an obligation insofar as your core needs are not at stake.⁹ In the latter sort of case, we tend to think I would have broad discretion in whether or not to drive you—I, after all, have my own projects and plans, the free pursuit of which I have reason to value, and hence to prioritise over the non-core needs of others.

That there are dependence-based duties, and where their force comes from, is fairly straight-forward to explain. That dependence generates duties and claims is a central feature of our moral understanding, and underlines everything from our basic understanding of the special obligations that are owed to children by their parents, to well-known thought experiments such as Peter Singer's famous pond case (1972), and rescue cases more generally. Indeed, the contours and sources of our dependence upon others provides a pretty good map of who owes us demanding positive duties; we depend, albeit in different ways and for different needs, upon our partners, our state, our employers, and, perhaps to lesser extents, our friends, our neighbours, and so on (Goodin 1986; see also Collins, 2013b, 2015). The force of dependence-based duties is equally plain; they are grounded in the moral importance of attaining our core needs.

Whilst this picture is intuitive enough, it is worth digging further into the structure of dependence-based claims, both to clarify what demands it makes of agents, and to better differentiate it from alternative groundings of corporate duties. On the definition given above, there are two variables

⁸ Berkey also gives a fourth reason, namely that corporations provide employment, which is particularly important for the prospects of the global poor. This, however, is just a further specification of the capacity-based argument, so I consider it part of the first reason.

⁹ For those interested in a more extended discussion of dependence than I can provide here, see Collins (2015, pp. 97–123). My own views on the topic were shaped by reading Kirton (unpublished manuscript).

which determine the degree of dependence present within a given relationship; the ‘integralness’ of a depended-upon agent, and the ‘coreness’ of a given need. To further refine our understanding of dependence-based claims, then, I’ll outline how best to understand each of these in the following two sub-sections, before noting how they interact with one another in the business context.

Need

Part of what distinguishes weak from strong dependence is the nature of the needs at stake for the dependent agent. On the account given above, only core needs generate stringent duties. Whilst we often use needs talk in low-stakes contexts like ‘needing’ a drink after a long day at the office, core needs as I understand them here have a considerably narrower extension; they refer to those things which we believe most¹⁰ of us would require if we are to live decent lives without considerable dysfunction.¹¹ Needs of this sort are more or less “necessary, indispensable, or inescapable, given the kinds of creatures that we are and the requirements for functioning in social settings” (Brock & Miller, 2019). Where we are deprived of such needs we tend to suffer considerable harm. This harm can be physical, of course, but it need not be—when we are deprived of the social bases for living with dignity in our social milieu, for instance, we, as social beings, suffer a grave harm, even if it does not show up on any X-ray.

Thus, it’s important to insist upon two distinct faces of need, each hinted at in the above description—one which is species-specific, and another society-specific. Along these lines, David Miller distinguishes between *basic needs* and *societal needs*, “where the former are to be understood as the conditions for a decent human life in *any* society, and the latter as the more expansive set of requirements for a decent life in the particular society to which a person belongs” (Miller, 2007, p. 182). Note that whilst suffering a basic needs shortfall will typically entail graver harm than suffering a shortfall in one’s societal needs, this is a contingent fact, and the distinction between the two sorts of needs does not rest upon the urgency of the needs in question (Miller, 2007, p. 183). Indeed, it is hardly an alien thought that someone could be

harmed more acutely by an assault on their character than an assault on their person. Hence, whilst basic needs are more plausible candidates for grounding universal claims, they have no categorical priority for agents acting within a shared social setting, wherein attaining societal needs (such as the social bases for self-respect and dignity, the opportunity to be a householder, to receive an education sufficient for navigating one’s social environment) may often generate demands upon others just as strong as basic needs do.

Ensuring that core needs are met, then, has strong priority over meeting peripheral needs.¹² We still need to know how to weigh competing claims against one another when several agents suffer from core needs shortfalls. Worryingly, the very idea of core needs and the equivalent moral footing it implies for each core need may look like it constrains our ability to engage in weighing or trading-off one need against another. To a certain extent, this is true—as core needs, there is little reason to say that one need is more central than another (beyond, perhaps, bare minimum levels of food and water), insofar as *each one* is deemed more or less necessary, indispensable, or inescapable for a decent life (Braybrooke, 1987; Miller, 2007; Reader, 2007). Fortunately, grounding the existence of duties in the importance of fulfilling core needs does not deprive us of the tools with which to engage in some triage. Whatever their parity on one conceptual level, some core needs shortfalls are clearly worse than others in morally relevant senses. These differences between needs will, and should, sometimes determine which needs we prioritise. Here, I note two considerations: urgency and gravity.

Urgency refers to the *time-sensitivity* involved in meeting a given shortfall. Where a needs shortfall is urgent, we need to rectify the shortfall quickly to prevent a serious attendant harm befalling the agent in need. Needs shortfalls can be ranked in terms of their urgency insofar as we can judge how soon the relevant shortfall generates the relevant harm—so a woman stranded in the desert has a more urgent need for water than for food, and a more urgent need for food than for education. Oftentimes, urgency on its own will not be the deciding factor in what we do—in order for urgency to move us to action, it typically must be coupled with a high degree of *gravity* of the needs shortfall. Whilst urgency refers to the time-sensitivity of the need in question, gravity refers to

¹⁰ I say ‘most’ rather than ‘all’ to accommodate the fact of human diversity. Some rare souls might, for instance, have no felt need for companionship, or leisure, or shelter, and so on. The existence of such persons, however, does not dent the fact that these are very real needs for most of us, nor does such persons’ existence reduce the potential of such widely shared needs to generate claims upon others.

¹¹ For a similar way of understanding needs, see David Braybrooke (1987), who bases his own account on the importance to us of being able to successfully occupy and perform in certain central social roles—specifically those of worker, citizen, householder, and parent—“without derangement” (1987, p. 47).

¹² Whilst there may be grey areas along the border separating core from peripheral need, that there is a clear qualitative difference in the moral force of some needs claims and others is such a basic aspect of our moral convictions that the stipulation of some threshold separating out demanding from non-demanding needs is itself uncontroversial enough; to borrow Soran Reader’s example, “[t]he desire for a bite of chocolate of a well-fed person is a clear case on the non-demanding side of the threshold, whilst the need for some sugar of a hypoglycaemic diabetic is a clear case on the morally demanding side” (2007, p. 97).

the *degree of harm* which is liable to befall the agent if the relevant need continues to go unmet. So, with regards to the woman in the desert, there is more urgency in getting water than food, but the need for water is no more grave than the need for food. Alternatively, a shortfall in our core need for physical safety will be graver if it leaves us vulnerable to severe mutilation than it does to a broken nose. Whilst core needs have a sort of in principle moral equivalence, then, some needs shortfalls ought to still be prioritised insofar as they are graver or more urgent. Whichever unmet need has the greatest combination of centrality, urgency, and gravity, call it the most ‘intense’ need shortfall. (I’ll say something more about how centrality, urgency, and gravity ought to be weighed against one another below.)

Integralness

Let’s turn now to the integralness of one agent to the fulfilment of another agent’s need. Integralness, as I understand it here, is a fairly straightforward notion, linking one agent to another on the basis of how well-placed they are to meet a given (core) need, where ‘well-placedness’ always involves a comparative component—for every unmet need, there is always one or several agents best-placed to meet it (Collins, 2013b). The agent who represents your best chance to meet your need, in the sense that generates moral demands on them, is the one with the most promising mix of abilities to help, circumstantial proximity and, in some cases, awareness of your situation.¹³ An agent’s willingness to meet your need will not ordinarily sway considerations of duties grounded in dependence—it would be odd to conclude that I do not depend on you to pull me out from a deep well simply because you firmly insist that you’d really rather not. Having said that, where someone fails to fulfil their dependence-based duty as the agent best-placed to meet a certain need, a derivative duty falls on the second best-placed agent, and so on (Collins, 2013b)—so your refusal to help me out of the well means that someone passing by who hears our exchange has a duty to help me, even though you were somewhat more proximate.

As can be seen from these examples, someone need not be fulfilling your need currently in order for them to be integral to the fulfilment of your need—so long as they are (one of) your best chance(s) to realize your needs, they will still be more or less integral to your need fulfilment (Smith, 2010). Having said that, a sort of path-dependence applies to dependence relations which is worth highlighting. You need

not already be in a relationship in any thick sense of the term to bear duties to another agent—such as you owe me when you hear that I’m stuck down a deep well. But it is also the case that once you enter into a relationship with an agent, you will often bear duties within that relationship which you did not owe to them before. Examples abound. I may, for instance, have a need for Wi-Fi to do my work, but I only come to depend upon my specific Wi-Fi provider for this once I sign a contract with them—lack of Wi-Fi is no longer simply a shortfall on my side, but also a failing on their part to fulfil my needs. Similarly, you have no generalizable duty to help people through periods of deep mental anguish. If, however, we become very close friends and I subsequently experience such anguish, you almost certainly do.

Thus, our meeting a person’s needs in the past or promising to do so (if only implicitly) as part of our current role in their lives can turn weak dependence into strong dependence, insofar as we can move from being non-integral to integral parts of someone’s need-fulfilment. (You’ll note, in these examples, that neither you nor the Wi-Fi company are easily replaceable—certainly not in the short term.) By entering into a relationship with an agent, one often generates greater abilities to meet their needs than others have (whether through having already laid down specialised infrastructure for doing so, learning more precisely how best to fulfil a given need, or because there is an affective component to A’s needs meaning that they can only be met by those A cares about or trusts). Additionally, being in relationship with an agent will often (and certainly ought to) increase our awareness of their needs and when they are going unmet. Where such conditions hold, the duties that the depended-upon agent bears become far more stringent, with the upshot that it will often be ethically inappropriate to expect B, fulfilling A’s core need, to be or continue looking elsewhere to see if other, more intensive needs shortfalls remain outstanding which B could meet instead of meeting A’s. Insofar as seeing oneself as being obliged to fulfil and protect another’s core needs is a constitutive part of many of our most valued relationships, we cannot expect agents to be shifting their attentions and allegiances on the basis of continuous triage concerning whose unmet needs claims are ultimately more intensive (see e.g. Blum, 1980; Keller, 2013; Pettit, 2015).

It’s worth saying a little bit about how this particular way of tying duty-holders to claim-holders is different from other ways in which authors have done so in the literature. Young (2011), for instance, is well-known for developing a theory of responsibility grounded in social connection, which she—and subsequently several others (see e.g. Schrempf, 2014; Wickert, 2016)—have applied to corporate contexts. The sense of connection tying duty-holders to claim-holders in Young’s account is that agents are ‘connected’ to an injustice insofar as they participate in the reproduction of a given

¹³ Where for instance, you are suffering in silence, you may depend most strongly on that person who correctly apprehends your plight, even if they are not necessarily the agent otherwise best-placed to come to your aid.

(unjust) social structure.¹⁴ Such participation, on Young's account, generates forward-looking political responsibilities to rectify the relevant injustices, where 'political responsibilities' involve taking communicative action alongside others with the purpose of reshaping or contributing to the reshaping of an unjust social structure. Such responsibilities are liable to fall widely, insofar as countless agents must participate to reproduce any large-scale social structures, such as those pertaining to the global economy. Given such a widespread attribution of responsibilities for rectifying structural injustice, Young is keen to emphasize that the sorts of responsibilities she attributes to agents on this model are forward- rather than backward-looking, and do not necessarily entail blame where agents fail to fulfil their political responsibilities (2011, e.g. pp. 100–104).

It should be clear that this is quite a different sort of connection—one which directly ties you as a consumer to factory workers in Bangladesh making your t-shirts—than the sort that the dependence-based account relies upon. The latter account only attributes demanding responsibilities to agents when they play a particularly significant role in fulfilling or frustrating another agent's needs. Moreover, true to the fact that its moral force is grounded in the importance of fulfilling agents' core needs, dependence relations don't only, or even primarily, ground political responsibilities; the best way of fulfilling one's dependence-based duties will more often than not be to do so directly within a given relationship (though see the fourth section). Finally, whilst the responsibilities which the social connection model identifies do not make their holders liable for blame when they fail to meet them, this is decidedly not the case when an agent fails to be dependable—failing to meet someone's core needs when they suffer from a shortfall very often does mark one out as blameworthy.

The focus on societal as well as basic needs also differentiates the dependence-based account from accounts which restrict corporate responsibility to rescue-like cases (such as Dunfee), as well as those which restrict it to human rights fulfilment (such as Wood). To see why, think of the relationship between workers and their employers. To be sure, both human rights and basic needs are at stake in some employment relations, where for instance workers are subject to hazardous working conditions which put their bodily integrity at risk. But even in the most run-of-the-mill employment conditions, employees' core needs are often at stake—not just insofar as paid work is the means by which they manage to feed, clothe, and house themselves, but also, in many societies, insofar as gainful employment for many people represents an integral aspect of their social identity, the

basis of their self-respect, and gives them standing amongst their peers. On the dependence account, then, employers are hardly footloose with respect to how they treat their workers (see the next section)—the fact that core needs are at stake is alone sufficient to generate claims on the part of workers and duties on the part of corporate managers.

Weighing Prospective Duties

Which needs claims are to be prioritised is, on the dependence account, determined by the nature of the needs at stake and the integralness of the connection between the depended-upon and the dependent agents. Each of these—responsiveness to integralness and responsiveness to need—represents an important feature of our moral life, where we are concerned both with, on the one hand, properly valuing and contributing to the relationships in which we are tightly embedded and, on the other, showing impartial concern for others whose needs are great (on this moral duality, see especially the work of Scheffler, 1994, 2002, 2010; see also Young, 2011; Pettit, 2015). Where considerations of integralness and need (or, seen in another light, partiality and impartiality) are finely balanced, the dependence account may not produce decisive guidance. So where for example, a company located in Canada is deciding whether to meet either some non-urgent, non-grave core needs shortfalls within its local community, or instead the more intensive core needs shortfalls of distant children in Cambodia, the dependence account may not produce clear guidance. Thus, there is some moral space for discretion on the part of corporations in fulfilling their positive duties when degrees of dependence don't decisively speak in favour of any one course of action.

Despite this element of indeterminacy, the dependence account does set some important bounds to our moral reasoning: first, integralness being equal, the corporation ought to prioritise the more intensive needs shortfall; second, intensity of needs shortfall being equal, the corporation ought to prioritise the agent to which it is more integral; third, where an agent is already fulfilling one agent's core needs, there is no obligation to look elsewhere to determine whether other, more intensive needs shortfalls could be met instead—indeed, doing so will typically be wholly inappropriate. With respect to determining the prioritisation of competing needs shortfalls where centrality, gravity, and urgency differ and integralness is equivalent, the following principles apply: all core needs take precedence over all non-core needs; core needs have no categorical priority over one another unless there are differences in the urgency or gravity of the needs shortfalls involved; where the gravity or urgency of core needs at stake differ, alleviating the graver needs shortfall should take priority over others—unless the

¹⁴ In adopting this interpretation of Young, I follow McKeown (2018).

most urgent need(s) can be met first, without sacrificing the alleviation of the graver needs shortfall.

Cost, Partiality, and the Limits of Positive Duty

Alongside integrality and need, there is a third variable that shapes the existence and directionality of dependence-based duties, namely the cost involved in fulfilling a dependence-based claim. Given that corporations are not typically taken to have moral prerogatives, claims, or entitlements separate from those of their members, what constitutes unreasonable costs to be borne will presumably be cashed out in terms of costs that the (decision-makers in the) corporation are permitted to insulate some of their members—or, potentially, other stakeholders—from absorbing. Withholding its resources from alleviating globally urgent needs will, in other words, be justified only if it can be shown that (decision-makers in) corporations are entitled to show a certain degree of partiality towards others with whom they are connected. Below I will argue that a corporation is entitled to prioritise its own interests over the more intensive needs of others when the continued successful pursuit of the corporation's interests itself plays an integral role in the realization of other agents' core needs. (Typically, though not always, these agents will be the corporation's workers.) Framed in this way, the dependence-based account establishes a non-arbitrary limit to the demandingness of corporations' positive duties to outsiders, by grounding it in corporate members' own strong dependence (only where of course, such strong dependence exists).¹⁵

Discussions about reasonable partiality in the philosophical literature often frame it as being grounded in an agent-centred prerogative (Scheffler, 1994), whereupon an agent is entitled to give disproportionate weight to their own projects and plans or, alternatively, to insulate some of their central commitments from the scrutiny of an impartial consequentialist calculus (see also Miller, 2010). Yet without denying the plausibility that there are such prerogatives, we should note that much of what partiality motivates is not action taken for ourselves, but for others—typically those with whom we share special relationships (Keller, 2013). Partiality in such contexts has an importantly different normative structure from any partiality shown towards our own

individual projects and plans. We are typically entitled to treat our own interests as defeasible, and to prioritise other causes if we so choose, even at excessive cost to ourselves. By contrast, we are not nearly so footloose when we're tasked with, or responsible for, fulfilling the needs claims of others (Scheffler, 2010; Arrell 2014). Giving all your money to charity may be rash but noble when it means that *you* must live hand to mouth, but its cast is far more objectionable if it means that *your daughter* must now live hand to mouth as well. Such negligence brings to mind the “telescopic philanthropy” of Mrs. Jellyby in Dickens' *Bleak House*, who ignores the needy in her own family whilst devoting herself to setting up a mission to help the destitute in Africa (see Goodin, 1986, p. 23).

Even if the contexts in which we are entitled to act upon it are more limited than we typically allow, very few people would deny that there are at least some circumstances in which we're entitled to exhibit reasonable partiality toward some people. I take it, moreover, that our special concern for those we are in relationship with is most likely to permit departures from impartial concern in cases where the relationship plays an integral role in the fulfilment of one or several of its participating agents' core needs—when one agent is in another's trust, or care, or is otherwise highly vulnerable to the other's actions. Think, here, of the paradigmatic cases. Parents are expected to show reasonable partiality to their children. The state is expected to show reasonable partiality to the citizens who are under its authority and especially vulnerable to its decisions (Miller, 2010). Our significant others are expected to show us reasonable partiality, to assure us that we have a special and enduring place in their lives and in their hearts (Pettit, 2015). Tellingly enough, as our relationships become a little less central to the fulfilment of needs, any duties to act out of partial concern lessen in stringency, albeit gradually; we expect and demand less partiality from our friends than from our lovers, less still from acquaintances and our neighbours, less again—if any at all—from non-familiar compatriots, at least all things being equal.

To be sure, relationships that the corporation has with other agents are rarely, if at all, given any treatment in philosophical defences of partiality.¹⁶ Still, there is no doubt that many agents will often be strongly dependent upon the corporation and the decisions it takes—indeed, this dependence will typically be a good deal stronger than it is upon many of even our most cherished relationships. Workers in particular are highly vulnerable to corporate decisions.

¹⁵ For a related argument to the effect that dependence upon a corporation generates demanding duties owed to workers—specifically sweatshop workers—see Snyder (2008). His argument, in short, is that whilst we have imperfect duties of beneficence to everyone, these duties become perfect, i.e. stringent, when we come to stand with others in particular sorts of relationships, including dependence relationships. For a criticism of Snyder's argument, see Hidalgo (2013).

¹⁶ Though for a related topic, on loyalty within the firm, see Gardner et al. (2010) and Elegido (2013). Also pertinent here are arguments in the sweatshops literature that employers have specially demanding duties to workers once they have hired them, see Snyder (2008) and Kates (2019).

For most workers, continued gainful employment is how they put bread on the table, support their families and their respective life plans, and very possibly ground their sense of self-worth amongst peers. For such workers, then, the corporation they work for plays *the* integral role in many of their short- and long-term plans and the fulfilment of their core needs. Given this strong dependence, it appears that (the decision-makers within) corporations would be responding appropriately to the moral stakes at play and their role within their relationship with their workers if they exhibited some degree of reasonable partiality toward them. (Note that in contrast to workers, shareholders will often only be marginally affected by corporate performance.)¹⁷ As a general rule, then, corporations' decisions ought to be taken with workers' and vulnerable stakeholders in mind, and their core needs considered in the allocation of corporate resources.

I want to suggest that reasonable partiality of the relevant sort owed to those in our trust or care requires, when suitably construed, not the immediate satisfaction of a certain need, but rather the *robust fulfilment* of such a need (for a somewhat similar argument, see Pettit, 2015; see also Arrell, 2014).¹⁸ Again, thinking about the paradigmatic cases will be illustrative. In the case of parents, most of us think that reasonable partiality covers not just the current satisfaction of their children's needs, but the reliable continued satisfaction of such needs; parents are morally entitled to save money for their kids' future, even where there are others who could urgently use that money right now. Similarly, states are often thought to be entitled to show some reasonable partiality towards their own citizens, however limited this may be. Whatever this covers, part of it involves the state's realizing justice for its citizens now. But it also requires the state to ensure that it will continue to be able to realize justice for its citizens over time, and across a range of foreseeable scenarios (think, on this score, of Rawls' discussion of just savings, 1999, pp. 251–259). This all stands to reason—the sort of concern for others that reasons of partiality express are hardly so capricious that they could be fully expressed without some due regard for the other person's future wellbeing.

If all this is correct, it suggests an answer to what would constitute an excessive cost for a corporation to bear in

fulfilling a positive duty to some members of the global poor: *fulfilling such a duty is excessively costly if it would undermine the corporation's ability to robustly provide for the core needs of those who are already strongly dependent upon the corporation*—whether that be workers, consumers, shareholders or even specific communities. Because there are many different ways in which agents could, in principle, be strongly dependent upon a corporation, I will limit subsequent discussion to the paradigmatic case. Paradigmatically, those whose core needs are at stake will be, first and foremost, its workers. The way that the corporation ensures that it continues to play the role it plays in workers lives, and upon which they depend, is for the corporation to be and to remain profitable. It is, after all, only if the corporation makes money that the workers get paid, have a job, have the social status that comes from that, and can provide the things that they and their significant others have come to depend upon. Thus, in the paradigmatic case of reasonable partiality on the part of a corporation, it is acceptable for a corporation to prioritise its own interests in remaining reliably profitable where and insofar as doing so is necessary to ensure that workers' core needs are robustly met—even where the opportunity costs of doing so are that some agents' more intensive needs shortfalls remain unmet.¹⁹

Perhaps this is too all permissive. Berkey himself believes that corporations have no such duty to retain well-off workers; indeed, he believes they may even have a duty not to retain them if worse-off workers could do the same job better (2021, p. 49, fn. 23; see also Berkey, 2020). Berkey suggests that “no view that is grounded in the right kind of concern for the interests of the global poor” (2021, p. 49) could imply otherwise, but the truth of this either leaves untouched a defence grounded in reasonable partiality, or else it rules such a grounding out. Unless we're rejecting the possibility of reasonable partiality in the first place, however, it's not clear why its application in the corporate context ought to be ruled out; whatever our views on commerce's effects on human nature, it is surely excessive to think it could entirely stanch whatever moral sentiments would otherwise naturally develop between persons working together on shared projects in close proximity for much of their waking lives.²⁰

But even if some partiality is acceptable amongst corporate members, perhaps it allows far less than what I have suggested it does. In his own earlier discussion of reasonable partiality, Berkey (2016) notes that, in our world of poverty and plenty, following through on even moderate principles

¹⁷ The dependence-based account, then, suggests that corporations' primary duties are, typically, to its workers, rather than to its shareholders. In this sense, it echoes the analysis of Ferreras (2017).

¹⁸ An important difference between Pettit's and Arrell's discussions and my own is that they focus on *modal* robustness, whereas I am here primarily concerned with *temporal* robustness, i.e. robustness over time. The two sorts of robustness will often align, but they need not. An important difference in their emphases is that whilst modal robustness focuses our attention on the unconditionality of a certain sort of provision, temporal robustness focuses our attention on risk and uncertainty over time, and how agents are entitled to act for those in their care in the face of such temporal uncertainty.

¹⁹ This is not to suggest that corporations are entitled to prioritise their own interests over fulfilling their negative duties towards others. Such negative duties ought to be seen, in my view, as side-constraints on what the corporation is entitled to do in pursuing profitability.

²⁰ For an extended critique of the idea that commerce corrodes our morals, see Storr and Choi (2019).

of reasonable partiality may be far more demanding for the well-off than those who advocate a role for partial morality typically allow. He argues, plausibly enough, that:

Once we take seriously the breadth and depth of the unmet needs in our world...it is difficult to see how we might plausibly claim that a policy of sacrificing only modestly more than most well off people typically do is consistent with maintaining a serious commitment to the equal worth of persons and the equal importance of their interests.

(Berkey, 2016, p. 3032).

Of course, the devil is in the detail, and it is hard to know from such statements how much more Berkey believes we should be doing in practice. But whatever moderate principles of partiality allow, they surely allow us at least to refrain from sacrificing our own core needs; more concretely, they hardly require us to give up our job if this job is the means by which we meet our material needs and is a central plank in our basic life plans, and perhaps those of our near and dear. Given this, and given that prioritising our own needs is more defeasible than prioritising the needs of those who depend upon us, there's good reason to think that reasonable partiality in the corporate context would, in cases of workers' strong dependence, allow corporations to retain such workers in their job even where there are worse-off people who could do with that job.²¹ And, because prioritising the core needs of its workers will, to a certain extent, require the corporation to further its own interests over those of others, this prioritisation sets limits on how demanding are the corporations' positive duties to those to whom it is not closely connected.

We have, then, our three variables which determine dependence-based duties. A corporation will bear positive duties to a given non-member to the extent that there is a core unmet need at stake, the corporation is well-placed to meet that need, and doing so will not put the core needs of the corporation's strong dependents at risk—where this latter requirement will, at least in the case of workers, require the corporation to work to ensure its continued profitability. I will not draw out all the ramifications of adopting the dependence-based account here. Instead, I will simply note several of its implications to illustrate the intuitive plausibility of how it delineates the contours of corporate positive responsibilities. On the dependence-based account, more onerous positive duties are owed to the global poor by

robustly profitable companies than either precariously profitable companies (e.g. where their industry is highly competitive) or unprofitable ones²²; corporations equally involved in several communities will have more demanding positive duties to their more vulnerable workers, likely in the worse-off communities; corporations have more demanding positive duties to communities whose welfare is tied intimately with their activities, compared to corporations who are part of more dynamic economic ecosystems; corporations typically act permissibly when they act to fulfil either the reasonably important needs of the stakeholders to whom they are quite closely connected, or the more urgent needs of communities amongst the global poor to whom they are more tangentially, if at all, connected—but prioritising either over robustly protecting the core needs of the corporation's strong dependents will require a very high burden of justification.²³

Corporations, Collective Responsibilities, and the World's Worst-Off

For all its plausibility, there is a risk that the dependence-based account ends up seeming unsatisfactory, insofar as it appears to let most corporations off the moral hook when it comes to the world's very worst-off. There are two reasons it might do this. First, by allowing corporations to prioritise the agents they interact most intensively with, it suggests that many corporations may owe no stringent positive duties to the inhabitants of the world's very poorest countries, as they do not typically operate or produce in such countries. Second, insofar as the dependence account entails that a corporation's profile of positive duties is highly cost- and risk-sensitive, it weakens any suggestion that corporations are sometimes morally bound to operate in the world's worst-off countries.

It's worth saying a little more on each of these. We saw earlier that the agents most likely to be strong dependents upon a corporation are workers for that corporation. Thus, we can at least roughly gauge the geographic spread of any given corporation's moral responsibilities by knowing where it employs the most people, and hence where its production facilities are based. By and large, the world's least-developed

²¹ This raises the question of why corporations are entitled to fire workers at all, given that workers are often so strongly dependent. But corporations don't have a duty to fulfil the needs of dependent others where doing so would risk the reliable profitability of the corporation itself; any corporation that kept on workers that were costing the business money would not remain profitable for very long.

²² Corporations' whose profitability, however precarious, is insensitive to what we might call 'duty-spending' may also have demanding positive duties to others insofar as their profitability does not compete with (and hence does not defeat the reasons in favour of) fulfilling duties to other agents in need.

²³ Having said that, it will be comparatively easier to justify this when the workers have access to a decent social safety net, or where their skills are transferrable or in-demand—in either case, the workers are less dependent, all things considered, upon continued employment with the corporation.

countries (LDCs)²⁴ specialise overwhelmingly in the production and export of primary commodities, whether agricultural produce such as coffee and cotton, or high-value natural resources such as diamonds and petroleum. Of the 46 officially recognised LDCs—most of which are located in Sub-Saharan Africa—39 are classified by UNCTAD as being commodity-dependent (UNCTAD, 2019, p. 13), with primary commodities representing 90% in value of African and Island LDCs' merchandise exports (2018, p. 15). Thus, of the corporations most likely to have strong connections to persons in the world's worst-off regions, they are likely—at least seen from this vantage point—to be overwhelmingly corporations operating in commodity trade.

To see why this is a problem, we need to note the limited development prospects associated with specialising so overwhelmingly in primary commodity production. Some of the most striking problems with specialising in certain commodities—often discussed under the label of the 'resource curse'—are at this point well-known. In a review paper on the resource curse, for instance, Michael Ross argues that there is robust evidence that oil wealth in particular “tends to make authoritarian regimes more durable; it leads to heightened corruption; and it helps trigger violent conflict in low- and middle-income countries, particularly when it is located in the territory of marginalized ethnic groups” (2015, p. 240). But the problems of primary commodity specialisation are not restricted to such conspicuous effects. Specialisation in agricultural production, which so many inhabitants of the world's worst-off countries depend upon, is characterised by diminishing returns over time, as growers exploit and then move on from the best and most fruitful land to increasingly marginal prospects (Collier & Venables, 2007). Moreover, commodity prices tend to be highly volatile, which can occasionally lead to windfall growth, but the sheer price volatility can also cause serious instability in a country's economy if it is tied too closely to commodity production. For all these reasons, the long-run development potential of commodity specialisation is limited. Indeed, even the growth that commodity specialisation does bring during the good times may fail to contribute to development progress; in commodity-dependent LDCs during the period of 1991–2012, for instance, the impact of national economic growth on countries' development indicators was “close to

zero” (UNCTAD, 2014, vii).²⁵ It is in light of such considerations that a recurrent theme in UNCTAD's annual LDC reports is the need for LDCs to pursue “structural transformation” of their economies, i.e. a diversification away from commodity dependence and increasingly towards more productive specialisations, most notably manufacturing (see e.g. UNCTAD, 2014, UNCTAD, 2019, UNCTAD, 2020, UNCTAD, 2021; see also Nell, 2020).

The problem, then, is that the corporations most likely to be heavily involved in LDCs are not the corporations whose operations are most likely to conduce to improving countries' development prospects. On its own, this may not seem problematic for our discussion—given that the needs shortfalls of the world's worst-off will be particularly intensive, corporations of all sorts may turn out to have duties on this basis, which may even extend to locating in LDCs. It appears that Berkey, at least, thinks this is indeed the case (2021). Whilst, however, there are intensive needs at stake, and we can argue that corporations are the agents best-placed to meet LDC inhabitants' trade-related needs in their role as coordinators of the supply chains linking rich consumers to poor workers (see e.g. Chen, 2018; Danielsen, 2019),²⁶ it remains the case that locating in an LDC will very often be far too risky, and insufficiently cost-competitive to generate any sort of duty on the part of companies to locate there. In part, this is simply because LDCs are so badly off; such countries will tend to have poor material, social, and legal infrastructure, each of which will make it difficult to keep costs low and operation smooth. (According to the Economist, 2022, for instance, “transporting goods within Africa can be three to four times as costly as in other parts of the world” and in 2017 the paperwork required to import goods into Sub-Saharan Africa took an average of 251 h, compared to 9 h in wealthy OECD states.) It is also, in part, an artefact of geography; LDC are largely concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa where there are few large markets, hence corporations setting up here will tend to have worse access to cheap inputs and to consumers in rich markets than they would elsewhere. Finally, there are the self-reinforcing tendencies of internal and external returns to scale, which make successful diversification into manufacturing difficult for late starters.²⁷ As a result of such scale economies, countries

²⁴ LDCs are defined as ‘low-income countries suffering from the most severe structural impediments to sustainable development’ (UN/DESA 2018, p. 8). Poverty in the LDCs is, in general, more prevalent, more intensive, and more multi-dimensional than in developing countries. On deprivation levels in the LDCs, see UN/DESA (2018, especially pp. 80–81), UNDP (2019, especially the composite indices at the end, pp. 300–321), and Alkire and Aguilar (2012).

²⁵ Tellingly, the few LDCs who have moved away from commodity dependence performed better at translating economic growth into developmental improvements (UNCTAD 2014).

²⁶ Whilst reliable data are hard to come by, recent estimates suggest that multinational corporations are directly responsible for over half of all global exports (OECD 2018), and on one estimate around 80% of trade (in terms of gross exports) is connected to multinational corporations' production networks (UNCTAD, 2013).

²⁷ Internal economies of scale are intra-firm, and are typically generated as a result of decreasing marginal costs to producing an additional unit of goods. External economies of scale, also called econ-

such as Bangladesh and Vietnam have and will continue to have a significant cost advantage over LDCs with similarly low labour costs but without established industrial clusters of their own (Collier, 2007; Collier & O’Connell, 2007). (It is worth stressing that corporations are not mere bystanders in this particular process—their own decisions to relocate to countries like Bangladesh further exacerbates the marginalisation of worse-off LDCs by further reinforcing the cost advantage of the better-situated countries.)

I argued in the previous section that corporations are entitled to refrain from taking on risks which would jeopardize their ability to meet the core needs of their current workers, in particular. Given this, and given what has been said about the business environment within LDCs, it appears that many corporations can justifiably reject the idea that they should relocate some or all their activity to regions characterised by such unpropitious conditions. This is so even if such relocation would better alleviate intensive needs shortfalls than moving anywhere else would. Here, I will not refute such concerns—I believe that they underline real and important constraints on what we can expect of businesses in the fight against global immiseration. (Indeed, part of my motivation for raising this issue is to encourage further and more empirically informed thinking on how corporations ought to act in the face of such constraints.)

That said, I would like to conclude by blunting at least the sharpest edges of such concerns, by showing that the dependence account nevertheless generates some positive corporate duties owed to people in the world’s worst-off regions, even for those corporations not currently located there. It does so because corporations are not isolated, atomistic agents, each fulfilling their moral duties within tightly circumscribed moral fiefdoms; rather, corporations can and increasingly do communicate, coordinate, and cooperate—both with one another and with NGOs, states, and all manner of transnational governance institutions. These communicative, coordinative, and cooperative capacities entail that corporations can also hold duties as part of existing or potential collectives. This point—that such collaborative capacities generate corporate collective responsibilities²⁸—has been

Footnote 27 (continued)

omies of agglomeration, are external to the firm, and are reaped when locating within or near an economic cluster makes production cheaper through improved access to, e.g. specialist suppliers, workers with specialist skills, material inputs, specialised transport infrastructure, etc. For discussion, see e.g. Krugman (2009) and Helpman (2011, pp 72–79).

²⁸ There are ongoing debates about how best to understand duties that are said to be held ‘collectively’ (see e.g. Collins 2013a; Schwenkenbecher 2014; Wringe 2016; Smiley 2017; Tamminga and Hindriks 2020). For present purposes, it is sufficient that the reader accepts that corporations can hold some duties on the basis that said corporations can coordinate with others. I adopt, then, an ecumenical approach to corporate collective duties so as to encompass ‘joint duties’, where

made persuasively and at length by Wettstein in recent years (see e.g. 2009, 2012), building on the earlier work on collective responsibility of Held (1970).

To conclude, then, let me tentatively illustrate how the possibility of such collaboration entails dependence-based corporate duties even to inhabitants of LDCs that it is too costly or too risky to relocate to. Dependence upon a collective is not an unusual notion: if I am stuck down a deep well and it will take several onlookers coordinating with one another to rescue me, I depend upon them—and not on just any specific one of them—to do so. In such scenarios, the presence of others with whom they can coordinate changes the moral calculation for each onlooker; what they would each have best reason to do if they were to act alone may not be the best course of action when communication and hence coordination are possible. The same basic point applies to corporations. Corporations will often be able to do little about a given problem if acting unilaterally, but may nevertheless be able to make positive change through coordinating with others. Think, say, of a corporation wishing to improve its own sustainability.²⁹ Such a corporation may render itself uncompetitive if it unilaterally pursues sustainability-enhancing changes to its production process which give its competitors a decisive cost advantage. Their competitors, of course, are in a symmetrical situation. Insofar as coordination between these competitors is a live option, however, it becomes possible to overcome this collective action problem by e.g. introducing and monitoring an agreed set of production standards.³⁰

To be sure, how corporations are to overcome the barriers to locating profitably and without undue risk in economically marginalised LDCs is a far thornier problem than the above. Yet this should not dissuade us from asserting that corporations not only could, but have a duty to explore strategies and solutions which would make locating to LDCs viable and profitable. LDCs depend strongly upon corporations to the extent that they are, taken collectively, the central gatekeepers of productive international economic

Footnote 28 (continued)

agents have a responsibility to coordinate but need not form any sort of ‘higher’ group agent (Schwenkenbecher 2013; Schwenkenbecher 2014), ‘collectivizing duties’ where corporations do have such a duty (Collins 2013a), and also membership duties where duties stem from membership in a relevant group agent.

²⁹ For an excellent discussion on corporate responsibilities for the development of their sector, see Herzog (2017).

³⁰ For an interesting discussion on evaluating the *legitimacy* of such coordination between firms, in the face particularly of collusive dangers, see Claassen and Gerbrandy (2018). More generally, see the political CSR literature for discussion on the legitimization conditions of corporate involvement in political contexts; see e.g. Scherer and Palazzo (2011), Hussain and Moriarty (2018), and Dawkins (2021). For an interesting critical discussion, see Whelan (2012).

opportunities.³¹ On the dependence account, such corporations thus have duties to the world's worst-off so long as fulfilling such duties would not be excessively costly or risky. The comparatively low costs of exploring the possibility of collaborating with other agents (e.g. other corporations, transnational governance bodies, states, NGOs) mean that most corporations cannot appeal to the core needs of their workers to justify abstaining from such exploration and collaboration. The purpose of such coordination would be—perhaps amongst other things—to make corporate relocation to, investment in, and purchase from LDCs more promising and less risky. In contexts where large groups of corporations do already engage and coordinate with one another (such as in the Global Compact), there is an even clearer case for the enhancement of LDCs' development opportunities to be front and centre of what participants aim to achieve. At the more ambitious end of collaborative possibilities, corporations could help set up and participate in institutions dedicated specifically to the issue of examining and rectifying LDCs' economic marginalisation (for a similar proposal, see Lodge & Wilson, 2006). There is much scope for creativity, innovation, and trial and error with respect to furthering the integration of LDCs into corporate value chains and the global economy. Few corporations have a duty to engage in such experimentation themselves, but a great many have a duty to make the international environment more hospitable to such experimentation.

Conclusion

I have introduced and defended a novel dependence-based account of the existence, comparative weight, and upper limits of corporations' positive duties. Having outlined this account and its contours, I noted that the dependence-based account may well circumscribe the extent of positive duties that each corporation, taken individually, owes to the world's worst-off. Despite this, I showed that the same account can nonetheless explain why, and in what sense, corporations owe some demanding positive duties even to the poorest of the global poor, namely on the basis of corporations' ability to coordinate and cooperate with one another, and with other agents. Such abilities generate collective dependence-based corporate responsibilities insofar as the world's worst-off depend strongly upon corporations,

³¹ We should not exaggerate how many corporations will be on the hook here. There is a sizeable concentration of global wealth even amongst global corporations, with around 80% of profits being generated by 10% of companies (Economist 2016). Hence it is primarily corporations amongst this 10% who bear demanding duties to the global poor to reshape their economic outlook.

given the centrality of the latter as gatekeepers of productive economic opportunities.

To be sure, this paper raises many issues which warrant a more in-depth treatment than I have been able to give here. More needs to be said, for instance, about the interaction between corporations' individually and collectively held duties. How, when they conflict, are they to be weighed against one another? And when corporations are contributing to or acting as part of collective institutions, are they entitled to exhibit partiality towards their own workers' interests, or does participation in such institutions come with role responsibilities which render such partiality inappropriate? I have also said nothing here about the difference that a corporation's internal decision-making structure has on the nature and degree of partiality owed towards its workers, though it seems reasonable to think that the moral issues involved are very different depending on whether it is, say, a single CEO or the entire workforce that is making the decisions regarding what constitutes excessive risk to impose upon corporate members. Finally, there is scope for illuminating application of the dependence-based account to specific industries, and even individual corporations. Applying the dependence account to a multinational corporation such as Apple, for example, would not only provide the opportunity to flesh out and concretise the considerations that corporations should take into account in light of their dependence-based duties; I believe it would also produce interesting upshots regarding what such companies' ultimate priorities should be, given that the agents whose core needs are most intensively at stake in their operations are typically workers at the low rather than high-value end of the supply chain. This, in turn, might have implications for the internal decision-making structures that such companies ought to adopt. I hope to explore several of these issues in the near future.

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Declarations

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